SCHUITEN - PEETERS
THE OBSCURE CITIES

THE LEANING GIRL

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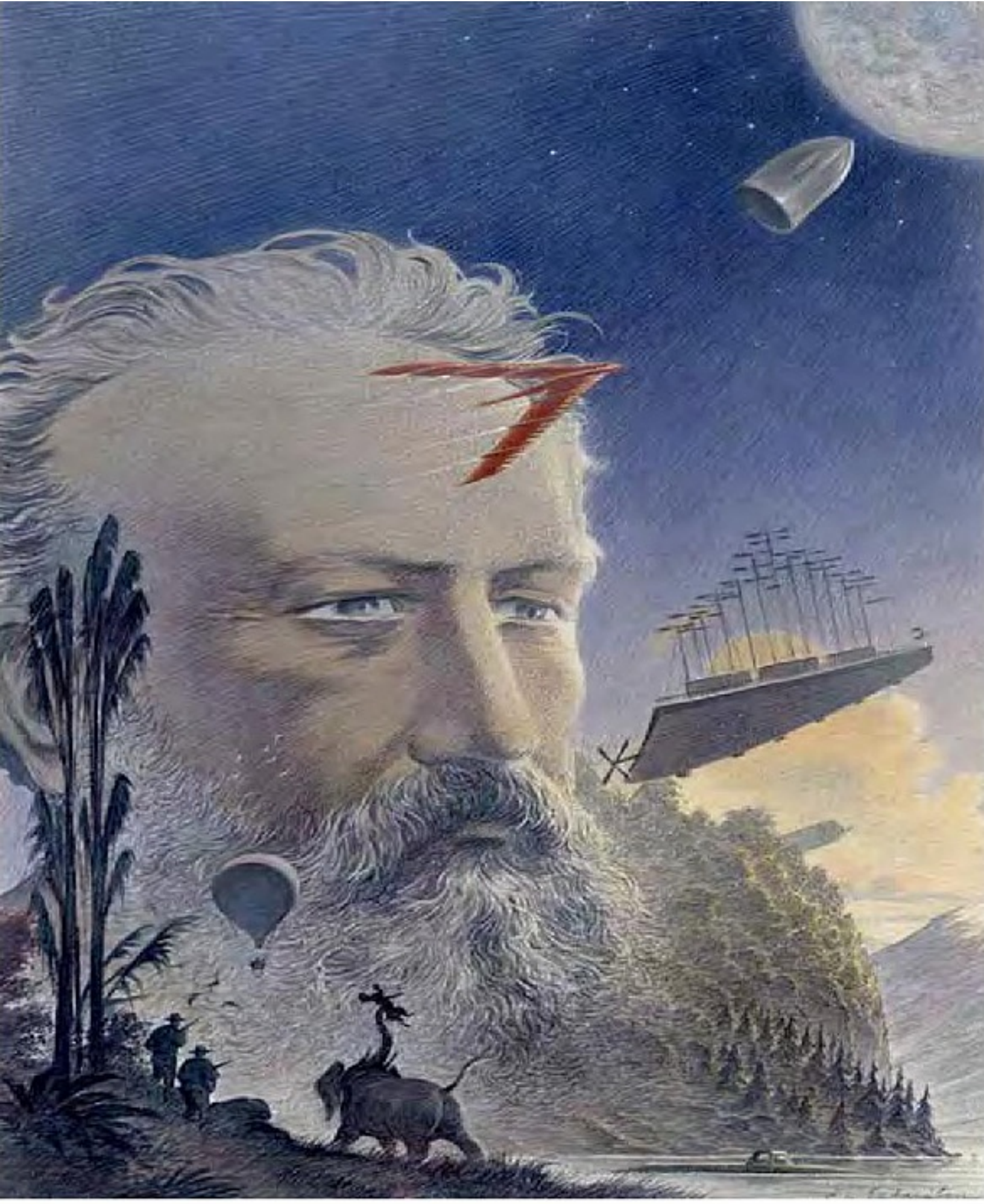

JULES VERNE

BY FRANÇOIS SCHUITEN

SCHUITEN-PEETERS

THE OBSCURE CITIES

THE LEANING GIRL

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Alaxis Press

CHICAGO

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Finally, thanks to Mary von Rathen. I know you are real and I hope to meet you some day!

— Stephen D. Smith, Publisher

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www.theobscurecities.com

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REGARDING MARY VON RATHEN
An introduction to The Leaning Girl

The world of *The Obscure Cities* is the brainchild of my life-long friend, François Schuiten, and myself; two people from different countries—who together created a world for the sake of exploring it. In doing so, we have come to realize many of our readers have embraced the idea as well, sharing with us countless adventures. Over the years, we have received cards, manuscripts, scholarly essays, a dictionary of characters, apocryphal fiction, board games, internet sites, and much more. Perhaps it is because *The Obscure Cities* is fundamentally so full of holes and destined to remain incomplete that it invites so much outside participation from our readers.

This phenomenon has, at times, taken some strange twists. Whether by coincidence or fate, several years after creating the character of Mary von Rathen, the heroine of the book, *The Leaning Girl*, and of the dramatic audio recording, *The Museum A. Desombres*, François and I encountered a woman claiming she was the real Mary. In her letters, "Mary" added to and made corrections to our stories, as if she had actually lived through them. We responded to her in similar fashion, accepting her accounts as truth and correcting, whenever necessary, any inaccuracies. When our letters became infrequent, she wrote to other persons linked to the world of *The Obscure Cities*. After a long silence, she has since resumed the communications through the Internet.

The book, *Correspondences* (sic), that we received at Angouleme, in January of 2003, under very strange circumstances (like everything concerning Mary), is the compilation of all these letters. It reads like a novel, with a beginning, a middle and an end, representing the "Testament of Mary."

With François, I have often thought about this conundrum. We have investigated, trying to understand who this could be behind the Mary correspondences, but to this day it remains a mystery. We ourselves, with some assistance, have continued to fuel this enigmatic game of true and false, of the hoax, especially with our pseudo-documentaries, *Le Dossier B*, and *L'Affaire Desombres*.

But with "Mary," we found we were caught in our own trap, enveloped in the labyrinth of our stories. A lot of people continue to believe that we are the authors of this story, that we have been writing these letters, all manipulated to strengthen the project of *The Obscure Cities*... But the truth is that this story has really evolved and has remained a mystery, even for us. It is a gift of a strange familiarity—*unheimlich* to use a specific term of Freud's. Without sharing too much, a lot of other readers have tried to live in that universe, or in any case, contact it.

Creating a parallel world of the imaginary is defining a territory. At first, it was simply the territory of two persons, François Schuiten and me. And then others came. In a comic strip, it is sometimes said, the panels are like small houses. *The Obscure Cities* therefore constitutes a set of habitable spaces dispersed on a map. Knowing there are people wanting to live there, even for a short time, is rewarding for us, as the creators, or as unwitting translators of an alternate, but very real, world. I hope after reading *The Leaning Girl*, you too, will want to visit *The Obscure Cities*.

Benoît Peeters
Paris, August 2013

WELCOME TO THE OBSCURE CITIES

When I was young, I was fascinated by stories of hidden worlds. Whether it was Alice first falling down a rabbit hole, then pushing through the sudden misty opening in her mantelpiece mirror; or the Pevenseys trooping through that wooden wardrobe into the White Witch's frozen domain; or the Banks children getting swept off by their nanny, Mary Poppins, to the circus of the Sun or the Noah family's ark—I loved the notion that just around a corner, or down a hallway, there might be a permeable barrier between all I knew and all I might imagine. I wanted that escape: I would stand in front of our full-length mirror in the second-floor hallway and try to will myself through it into a foreign and slightly magical country. As I grew older, this fascination matured into a love of books where the protagonist's mind could—did?—form the conduit between the real and the less real (or possibly the hyper-real): the educated self-hypnosis of *Time and Again* or the drug-induced parallel worlds of *The House on the Strand*.

In the 1980s, living at last on my own, a subscription to *Heavy Metal* magazine served as my conduit to more literally foreign worlds. I had recently discovered the transcendent beauty of Winsor McCay's *Slumberland*, thanks to Bill Blackbeard's influential collection of newspaper comic strips, and the lush European art of Moebius, Enki Bilal and Tanino Liberatore, all awaiting me in the pages of *Heavy Metal*, which fell on fertile and welcoming ground. It was in the November 1984 issue that I read the first installment of *The Walls of Samaris*, by François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters (although Peeters was left uncredited in early installments). Schuiten's art captured the dusky pastel colors of McCay and paired them with the meticulous architectural detail of a Piranesi etching, populated with vividly realistic characters trapped in a kind of existential angst. This first volume of what would become the long-running series, *Les Cités Obscures*, featured a fin-de-siècle design aesthetic married to alternate technologies (altiplanes, etc.), a match that I would later embrace in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, but here I got to see it, and it all looked so very, very beautiful.

But that was pretty much it for my travels in *The Obscure Cities* until I met Steve Smith at Book Expo America in the spring of 2012. He told me he was planning a new translation of the series, and pulled out some pages—and suddenly it came back to me, like a long-buried dream. Steve gave me an English-language copy of *La Frontière Invisible* (2002) and the original French-language version of this book, *L'enfant Penchée* (1996), and I fell back into Schuiten's deeply-realized world, enraptured once more.

And at last it is your turn; you have before you this new English edition of the story of Mary von Rathen. Mary will appear in other volumes, but this is her origin story, where we first discover how it was she began to lean. She will leave her mark on you, Mary will. Even now, sitting at my computer, I look at the leaning italic "I" of my document toolbar and see Mary. And it is only fitting I should, because the compelling nature of Mary's character is one of the engines that drives the story.

The tale opens with color plates depicting Mary's dreams, as rich and delicate as a Maxfield Parrish painting. Dreams are the stories we tell ourselves, late at night, to make sense of our world. Mary dreams of hands: a detail that will gain significance later. And she leans—flying, she leans; pushing, she leans; she leans in contexts where it doesn't appear peculiar at all. Then, in the turn of

a page and the blink of an eye, the color departs, just as does a dream, and the scene changes to intricately hatched black and white, as evocative as a Gustave Doré etching. We see Mary—her youth, her vitality, her enthusiasm—in stark contrast to her fractious family and shortly to an even more fractious group of astronomers. We see the moment of her change, without understanding what has happened any more than Mary does herself, and become immersed in the consequences of her difference. Mary makes people uncomfortable, as do all things that are different and inexplicable; she doesn't merely march to a different drummer, her entire self is oriented to a different—what? Ah.... spoilers.

Alternating with Mary's story are chapters of a haunting photo-novela, concerning an artist named Augustin Desombres, his very name evoking the shadows that darken and obscure his spirit. He is compelled, through a landscape so stark as to appear less realistic than Schuiten's drawings, toward a house, where he is further compelled to create murals that seem almost to draw themselves. The two stories appear to have nothing in common, no more in plot than in medium, other than their protagonists' single-mindedness, but they are on a track towards an inevitable intersection.

There is little more I can write without giving away wonderful plot twists and revelations, the startling, rewarding delights of which I would be loath to deprive the reader. Suffice it to say that the story of Mary is more than the story of a girl who leans, or the story of alternate worlds, but a meditation on the transformative nature of the imagination—of art itself. An artist's works have the power to transport us to new places—or merely to make us yearn for those places, as I once yearned for Wonderland and Narnia—and it is the marriage of the artist's imagination to our own that makes such voyages successful. For artists to forsake that voyage, as you will see, has repercussions that resonate through the long years of their lives, and perhaps through our own.

But enough from me! It is time for you to lean in and meet Mary, who will capture your imagination and pull you with it to new worlds. Enjoy!

Karen Green
Graphic Novels Librarian
Columbia University
New York City

My Dreams
by Mary von Rathen

Though the years pass, the memories of my early childhood return to me – memories of my life before I began to lean.

I dreamed much during those years, and some of those dreams left such an indelible mark on me that they continue to haunt me.

The first significant dream was about giant hands. I was trapped between two huge hands that must have represented my father. The light that emanated from them warmed me, but soon the heat became unbearable.

I wanted to flee, but I didn't dare jump over the edge into the frozen darkness. However, the hands were closing around me like the two halves of an oyster...

The second dream was the most frightening.

It occurred at our vacation home, two hours away from Mylos. The garden was immense and overgrown.

In this dream, my brother had hidden my doll deep in the garden, in an unexplored area. I searched for her frantically, but the night fell quickly. The deeper into the wild I ventured, the more the garden filled with monsters. Before I knew it, they had surrounded me.

As they approached me, they made an awful gurgling sound. I cried out for help, but nobody heard me...

Fortunately, not all my dreams were so dreadful.

In one dream, I found myself flying away. I drifted gently above a great rain forest. It was so calm–so different from Mylos.

As I approached a clearing, I heard some music that seemed strangely familiar. I started to sing and all of the musicians looked up at me. I had never felt so good.

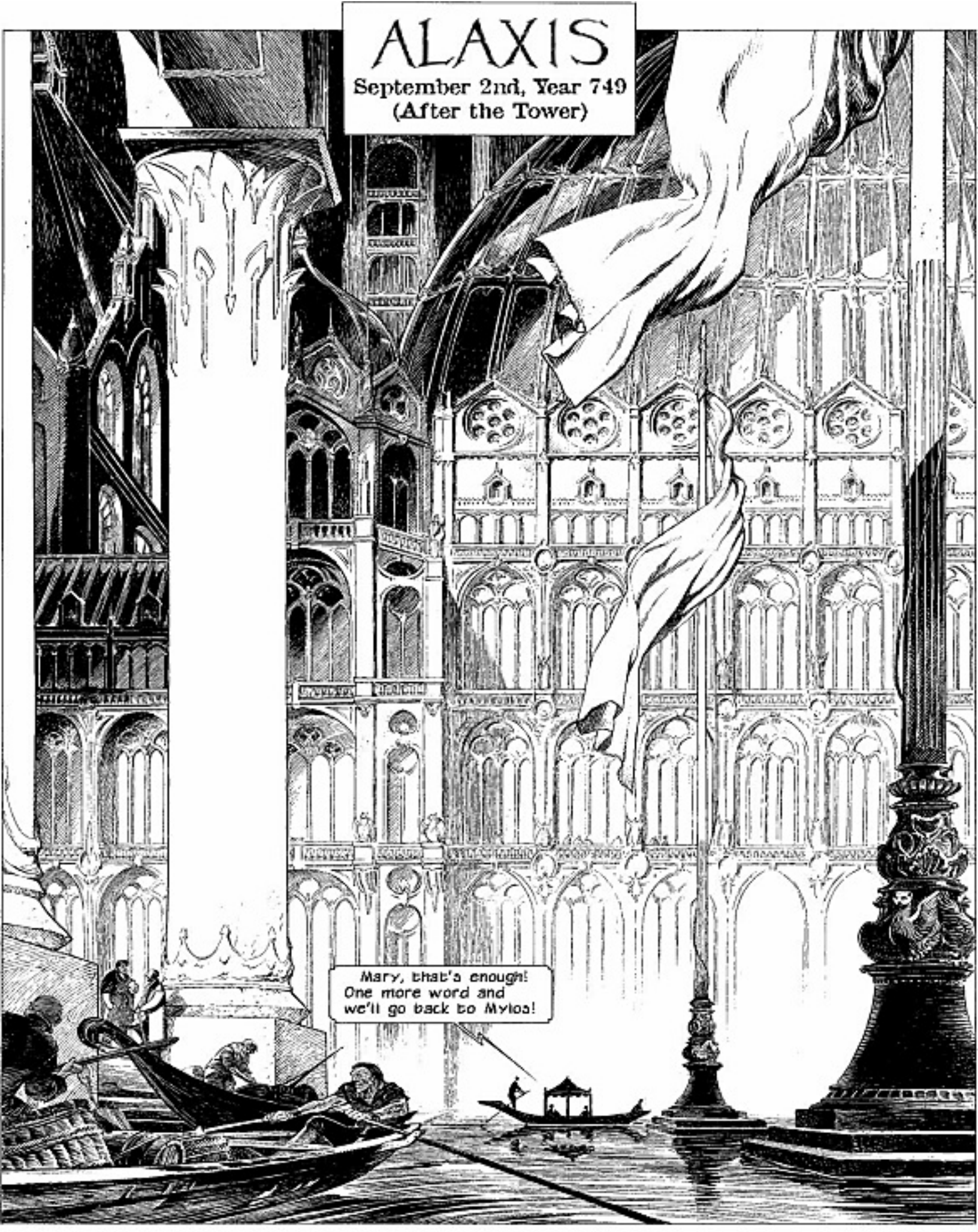
The last dream I remember occurred the night before we departed for the great festival of Alaxis.

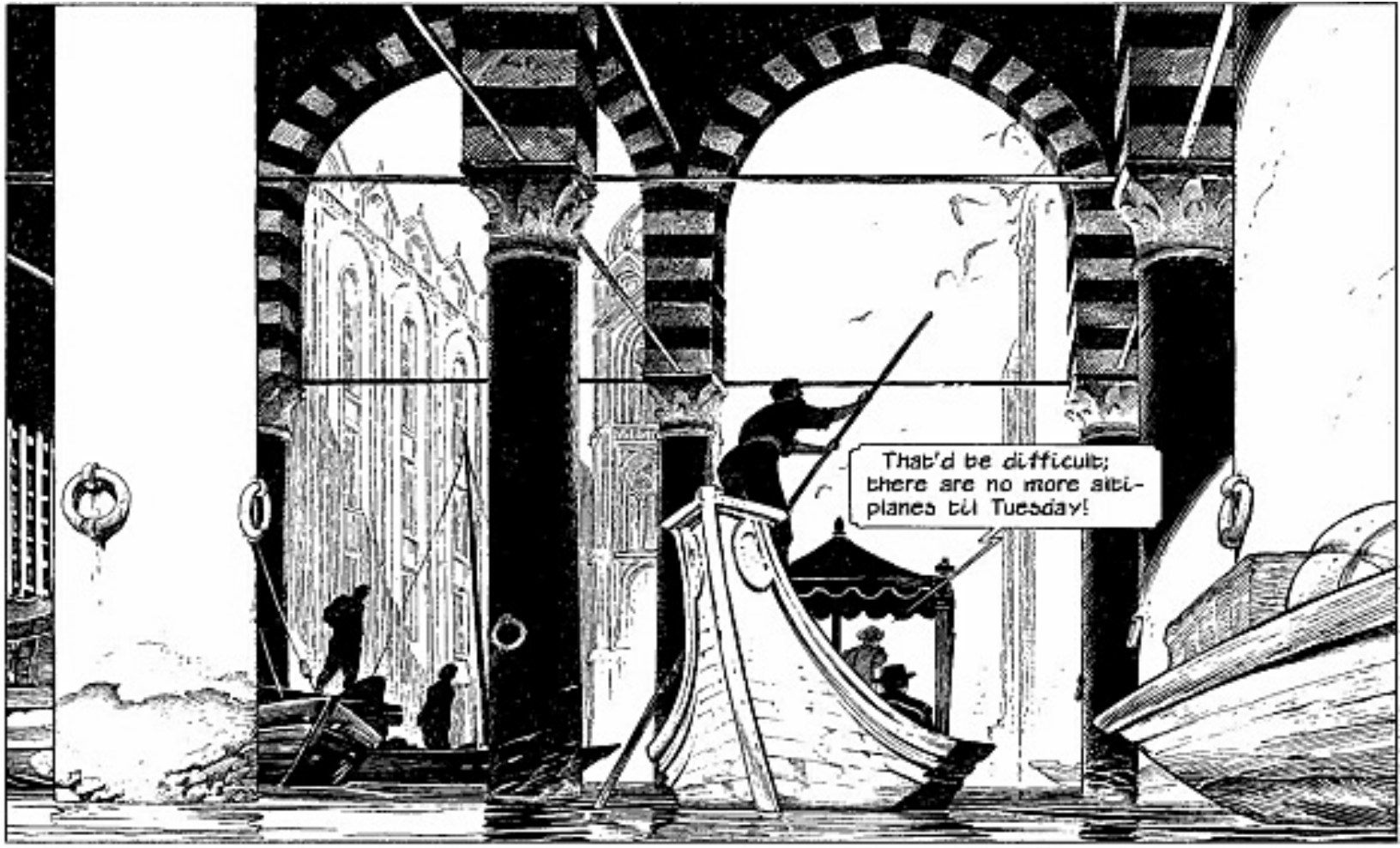
We had walked for hours and my mother was exhausted. She said that the road we were on was too treacherous, and that we should turn back.

I was afraid that Papa would listen to her. So, I pushed them forward with all my strength. Nothing in the world would stop me from going on this trip...

This is my story...

- Mary

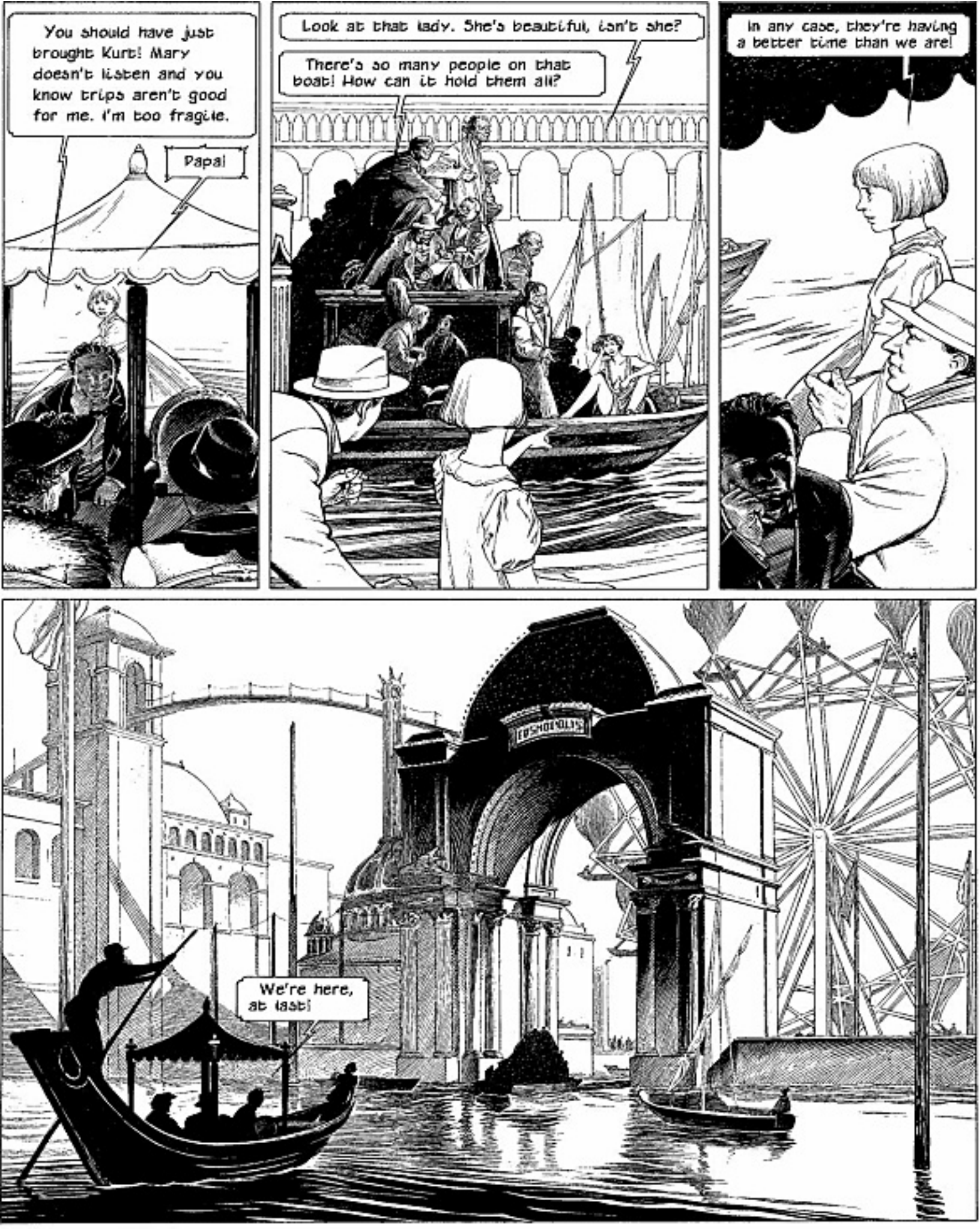

ALAXIS
September 2nd, Year 749
(After the Tower)
Mary, that's enough!
One more word and
we'll go back to Mylos!


That'd be difficult; there are no more airplanes till Tuesday!

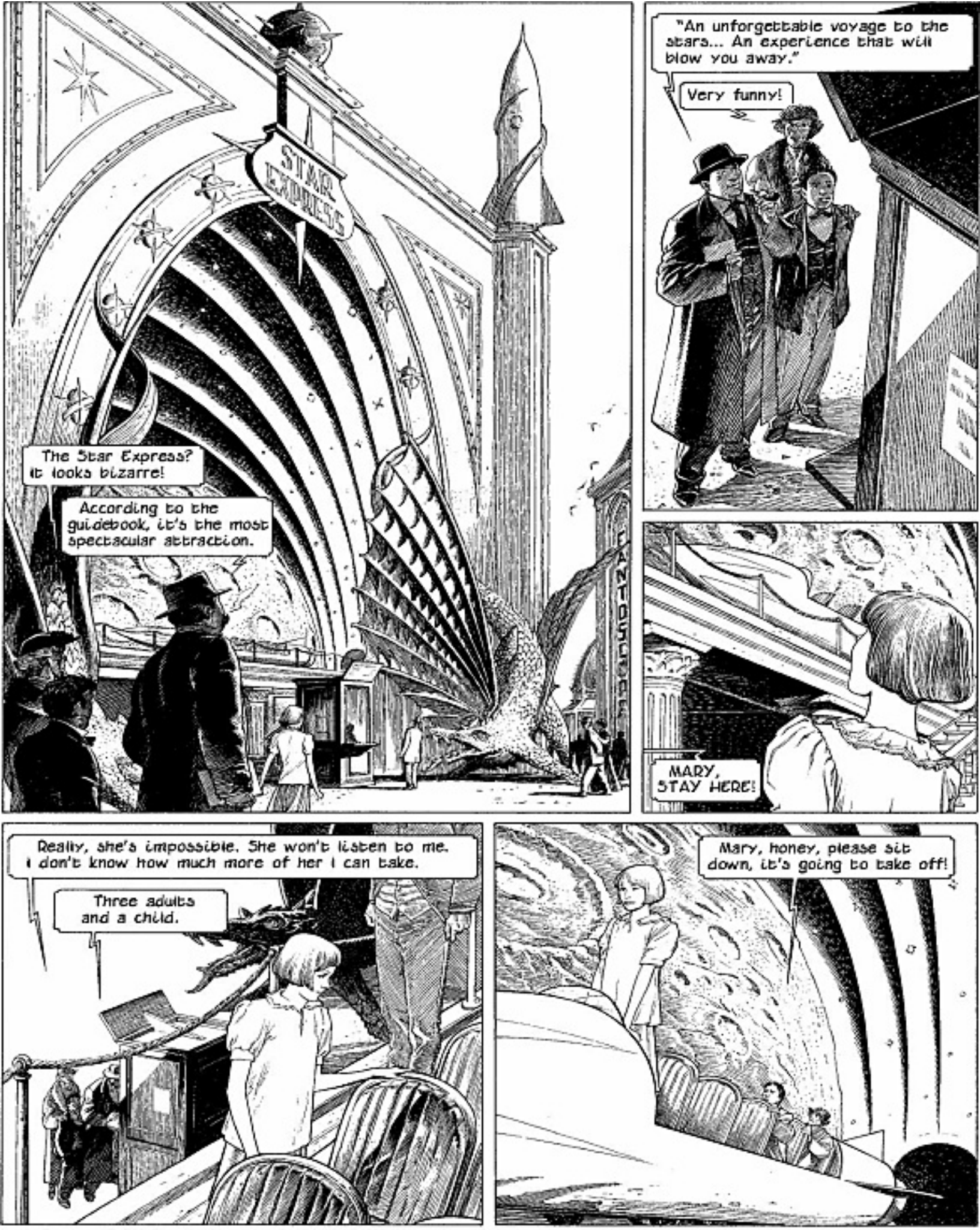
That girl... She's going to drive me mad, Klaus!

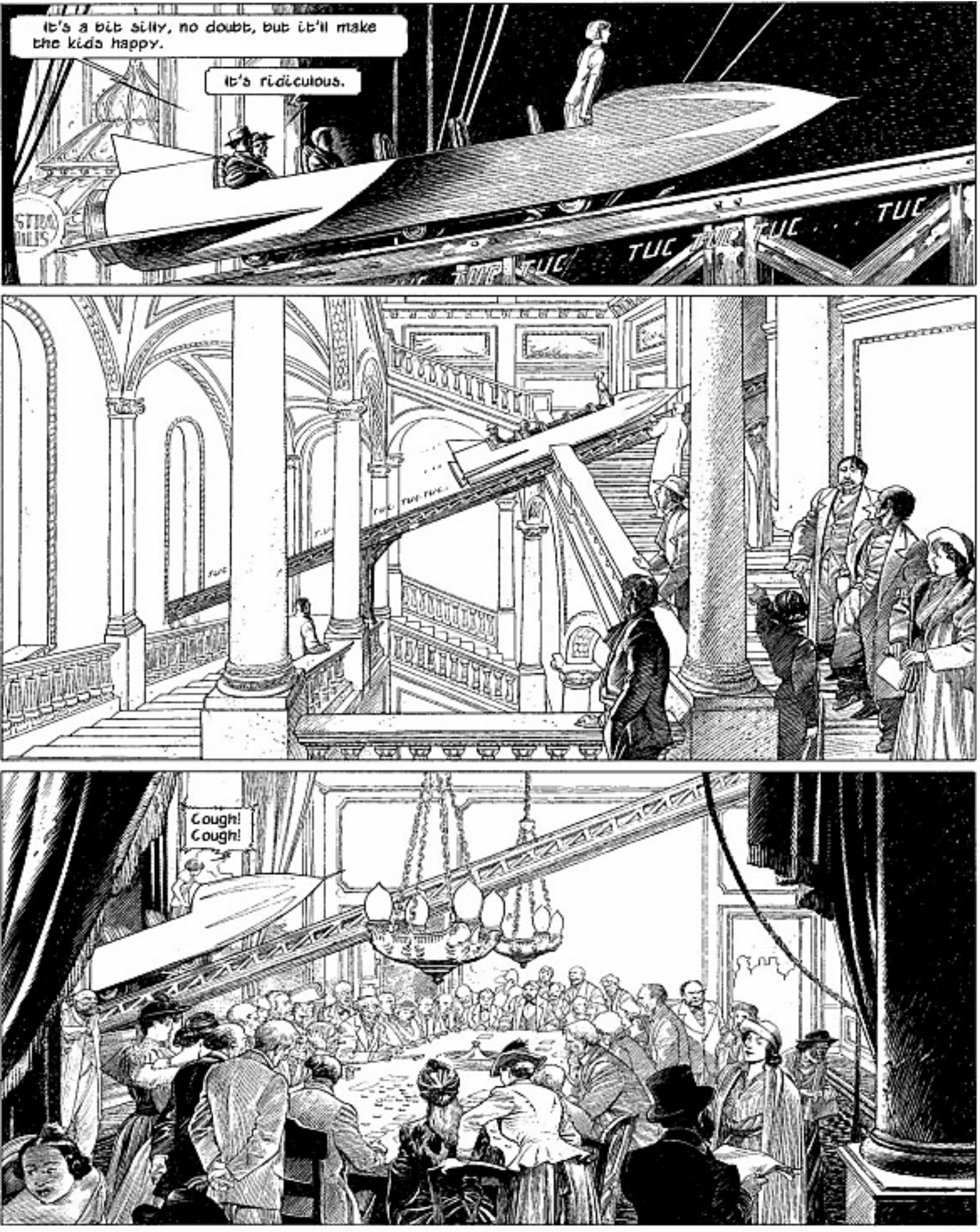
Calm down, Rosa, you know it doesn't do any good.
We should have never rushed into this trip. A three-day journey to get lost here in the crowds...

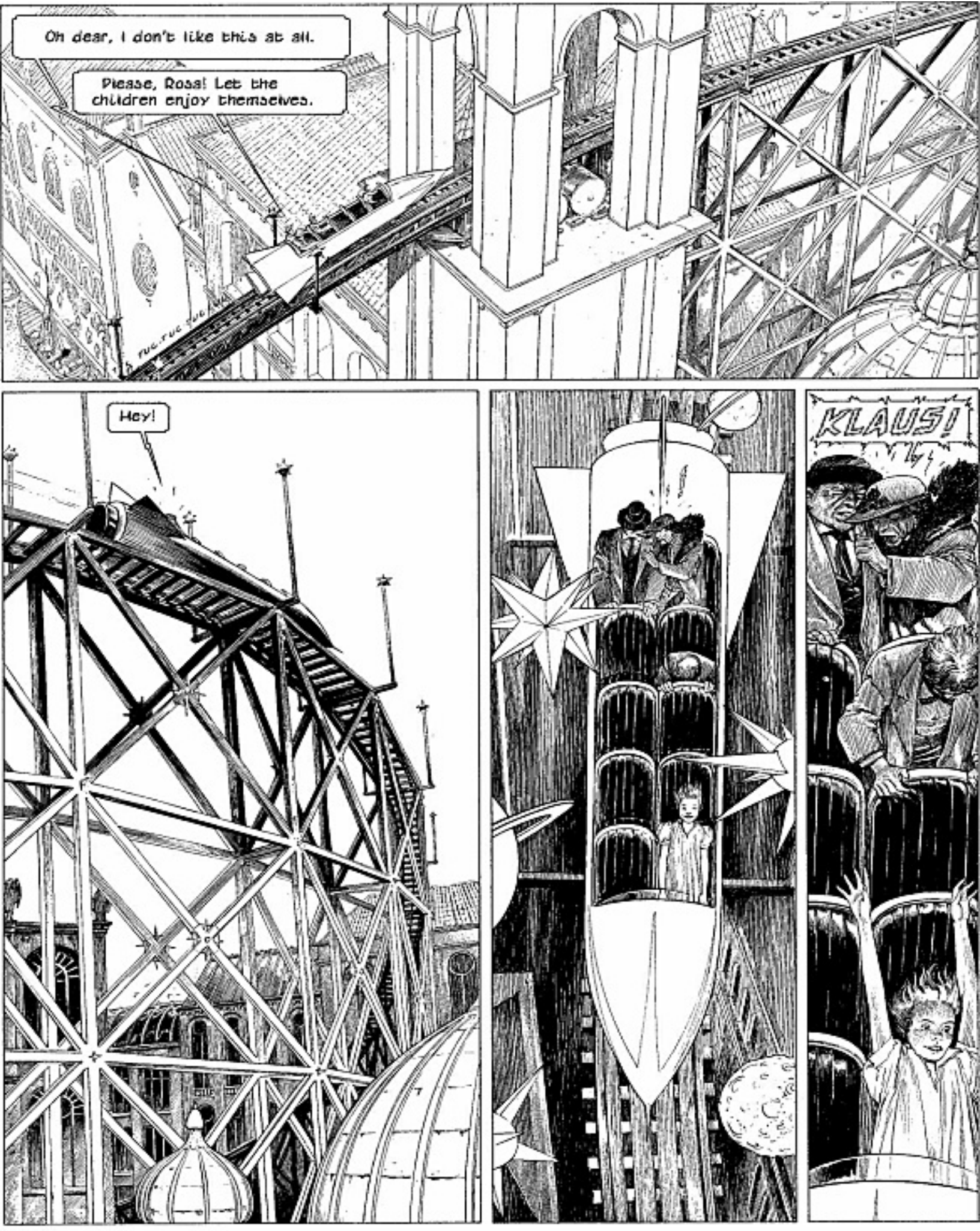
Come look, Papa!


You should have just brought Kurt! Mary doesn't listen and you know trips aren't good for me. I'm too fragile.
Papa!
Look at that lady. She's beautiful, isn't she?
There's so many people on that boat! How can it hold them all?
In any case, they're having a better time than we are!
We're here, at last!

Pay attention! And most importantly, stay together!
Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen!
Flowers for the little girl?
Marshmallows, caramels, candy sticks!
Go on now! Out of our way! Let us by!
Two things drive men mad, Kurt – money and ambition.
I see, Papa.
Did you see the way he looks? It's so sad!
Why do they let trash like that run loose?


STAR EXPRESS
The Star Express? It looks bizarre!
According to the guidebook, it's the most spectacular attraction.
"An unforgettable voyage to the stars... An experience that will blow you away."
Very funny!
MARY, STAY HERE!
Really, she's impossible. She won't listen to me. I don't know how much more of her I can take.
Three adults and a child.
Mary, honey, please sit down, it's going to take off!


It's a bit silly, no doubt, but it'll make the kids happy.
It's ridiculous.
TUC
Cough!
Cough!


Oh dear, I don't like this at all.
Please, Rosa! Let the children enjoy themselves.
Hey!
KLAUS!

E-e-e-e-e
The planet Antinea!
The red giants!
I think it's almost over.
I'm going to die...
How awful! The guidebook didn't mention all of this!

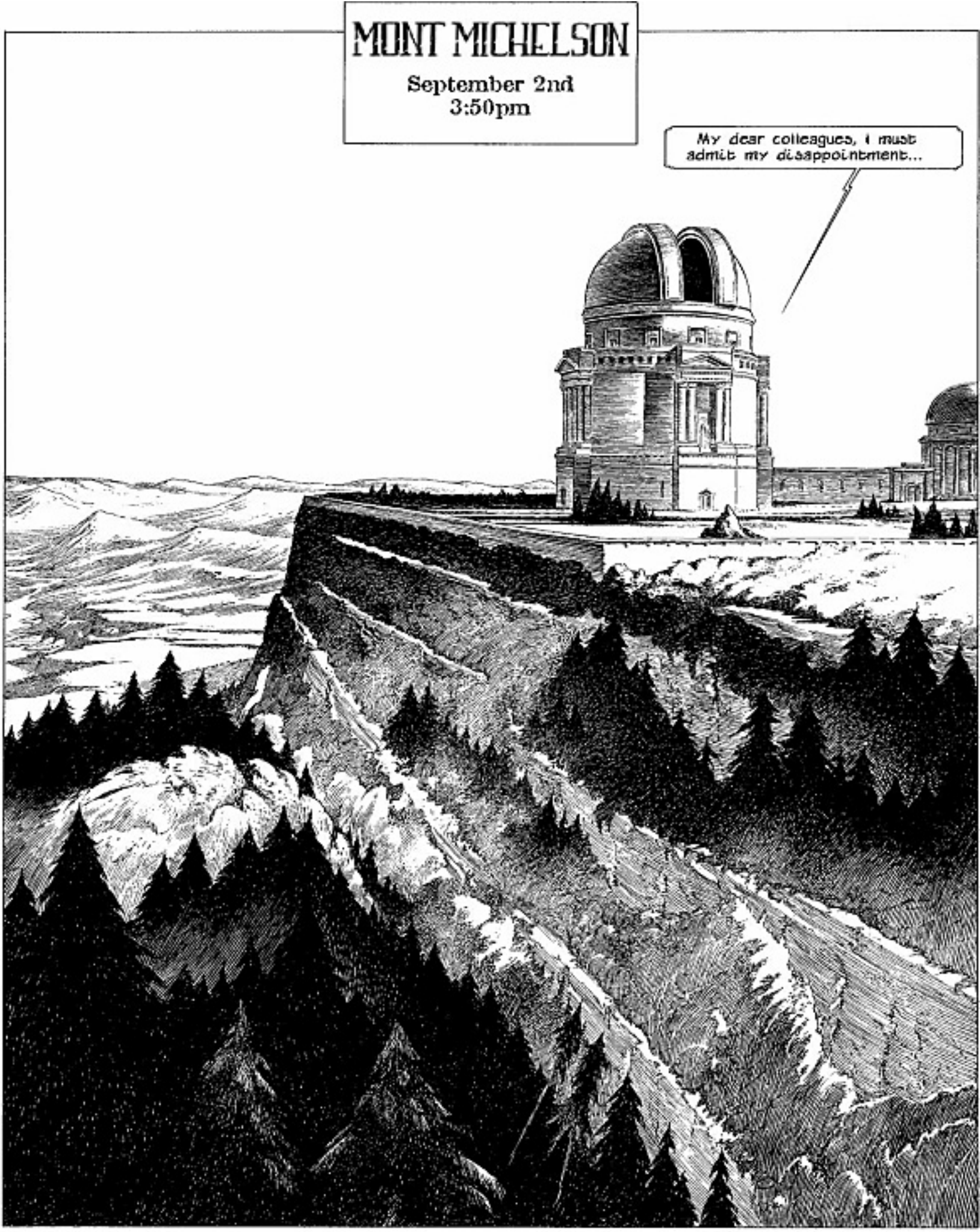
MARY!
Mary, don't touch that!
CLAC
This can't be happening! It's starting over!
Help us!

Paris
July 12, 1898

Why continue painting? I've lost my inspiration after that wretched review of my "Child of Phoebus" piece.

What good is it to continue painting if my work is so brutally criticized? My God, what a fool I've been to think I might actually succeed as an artist! They don't appreciate my work and they never will. Some say my style is outdated. To others, it is too modern.

These reviews are tearing me apart and yet I can't keep myself from reading them repeatedly. Art critics are cruel and their words are so biting. I'm starting to believe their opinions myself. My life's work... meaningless!


MONT MICHELSON
September 2nd
3:50pm
My dear colleagues, I must admit my disappointment...

In the three months that I've been here, we haven't even clarified what our priority should be... the exploration of the stars surrounding us.
I've made up my mind: I'm leaving. I'll continue my research alone, within my meager means, as I have always done.
Mr. Wappendorf, I couldn't disagree more! We only called upon you after the Brüsel disaster to perfect one of our telescopes.
Having taken a passion for stargazing, you wanted to redirect our projects your way. We agreed to develop a program with you, which took us away from our customary research objectives. So don't be in such a hurry! Science is a matter of patience.
Time is pressing, gentlemen. I would like to be alive to see my hypotheses confirmed. Didn't Michel Ardan calculate...
Gentlemen!
Michel Ardan is a fake.

His stay at the Genova Observatory was nothing but a series of catastrophes and...
Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Professor!
Look! The wave rate is accelerating more and more. We've never encountered this frequency.
The sky's getting dark.
Well, Guillaume, what do you have?
An eclipse?
Impossible. We'd have foreseen it.
The lamps won't light up anymore.
A meteorite?
No, there would be a shining tail...
BING
But...
Watch out!
The candles, Guillaume, quick!
BANG
Is that you, Wappendorf?
No, it's me, Soeren...
Gentlemen, this phenomenon is incomprehensible.

ALAXIS
September 2nd
4:05pm
It's so dark! This is mad. I can't believe this!
Look! It's all dark outside, too.

Ah, the light's coming back!
We're back!
Welcome back, Ladies and Gentlemen! Everybody, off!
Wasn't that great, Papa? The best ride of my life.
Are you sure it's all over?
Klaus, I'm exhausted...
Well, I never... Trust me, they're going to hear about it!
I want to speak to the manager! You're not going to get away with this.
It's not my fault, Sir. Something strange happened.
Look! An eclipse!
B

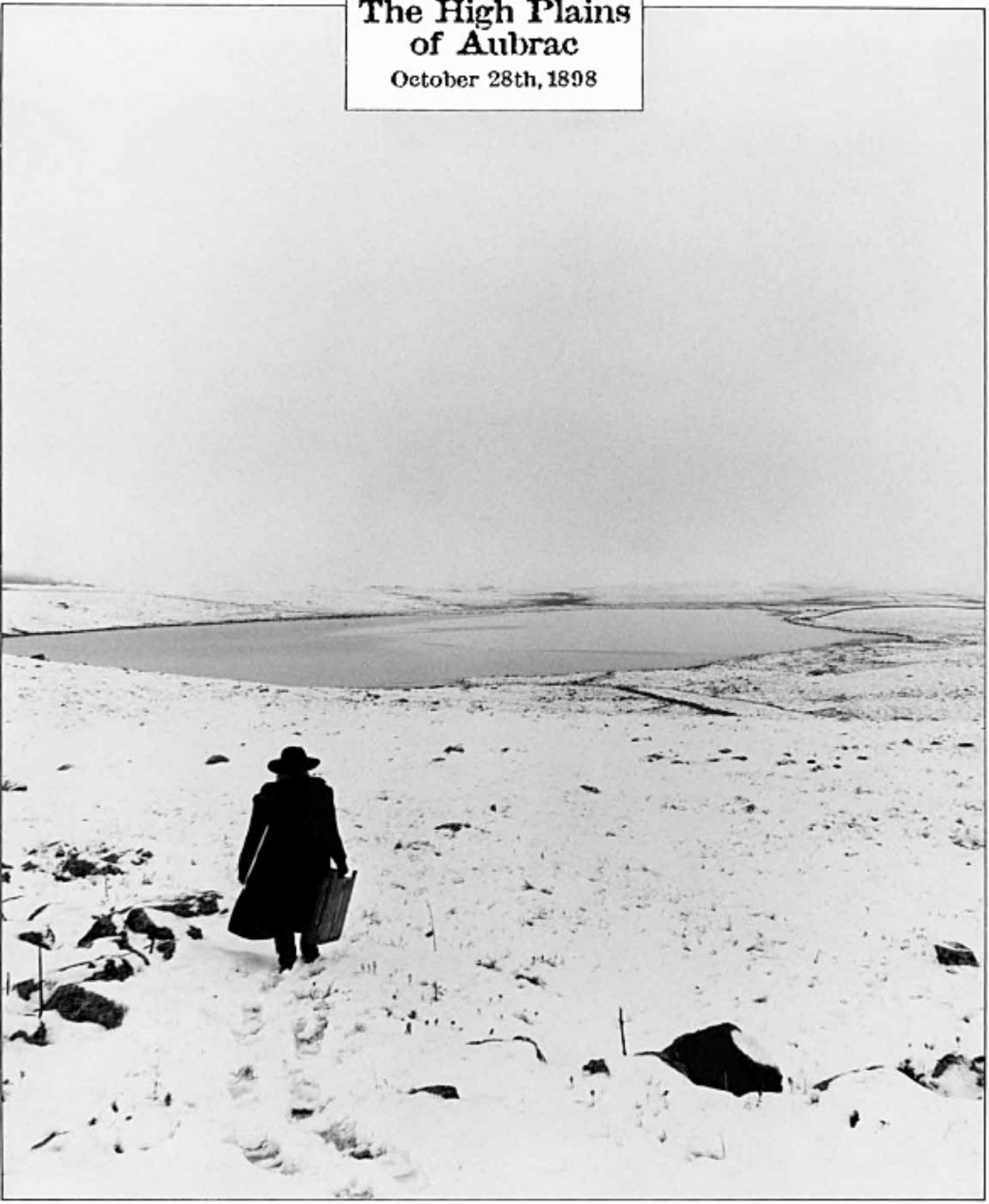
RRRRRRR
AAAA
Did you feel it? It's starting again!
MARY!
Mary, are you all right? What happened to you?
I... I don't know...
The ground is rocking in every direction.
Lean against me, honey.
You're dizzy. It's that stupid ride!
I'm all right, Papa!
But... hey!
AAAAA

What's wrong with her? Is she sick?
Mary, come now.
Papa, please! I'll be fine in a minute.
There, that's better... I'm fine.
But... she's not standing up straight...
What's going on here?
Are you the manager? Look at what's happened to my daughter!
Ah, that's not our fault! She had already gotten off before the ground shook.
Don't you walk away from me while I'm talking to you!
I assure you that we have nothing to do with these occurrences today. Acts of nature!
Believe me, this isn't the end of my complaints. I'm going to shut you down.

Look, Papa. She's walking funny!
It's weird, when I turn around, I'm leaning in the other direction!
It's incredible... an extraordinary phenomenon.
And yet, it doesn't appear to be a trick.
Try to stand up straight, Mary! You're making us look ridiculous!
She'll do anything to get attention.
I'm not doing it on purpose, Kurt!
Let's go home! In two days, it'll pass.
Today's lesson, son, is that frivolity is a waste of time. The Von Rathen were born to work.

The High Plains of Aubrac

October 28th, 1898



The first snow of the year fell tonight, making Aubrac more barren than ever. I've walked for more than three hours without encountering a single soul.

It is quiet here... safe. Peaceful. Far from the art dealers and critics! Those imbeciles. If they don't appreciate my work, then they'll never have to see it again! "Desombres and his bizarre imagination" won't bother them anymore.

I don't know why this rock has struck me so.
Its almost spherical form, perhaps? In spite of the glacial wind,
I've gotten it in my head to draw it.

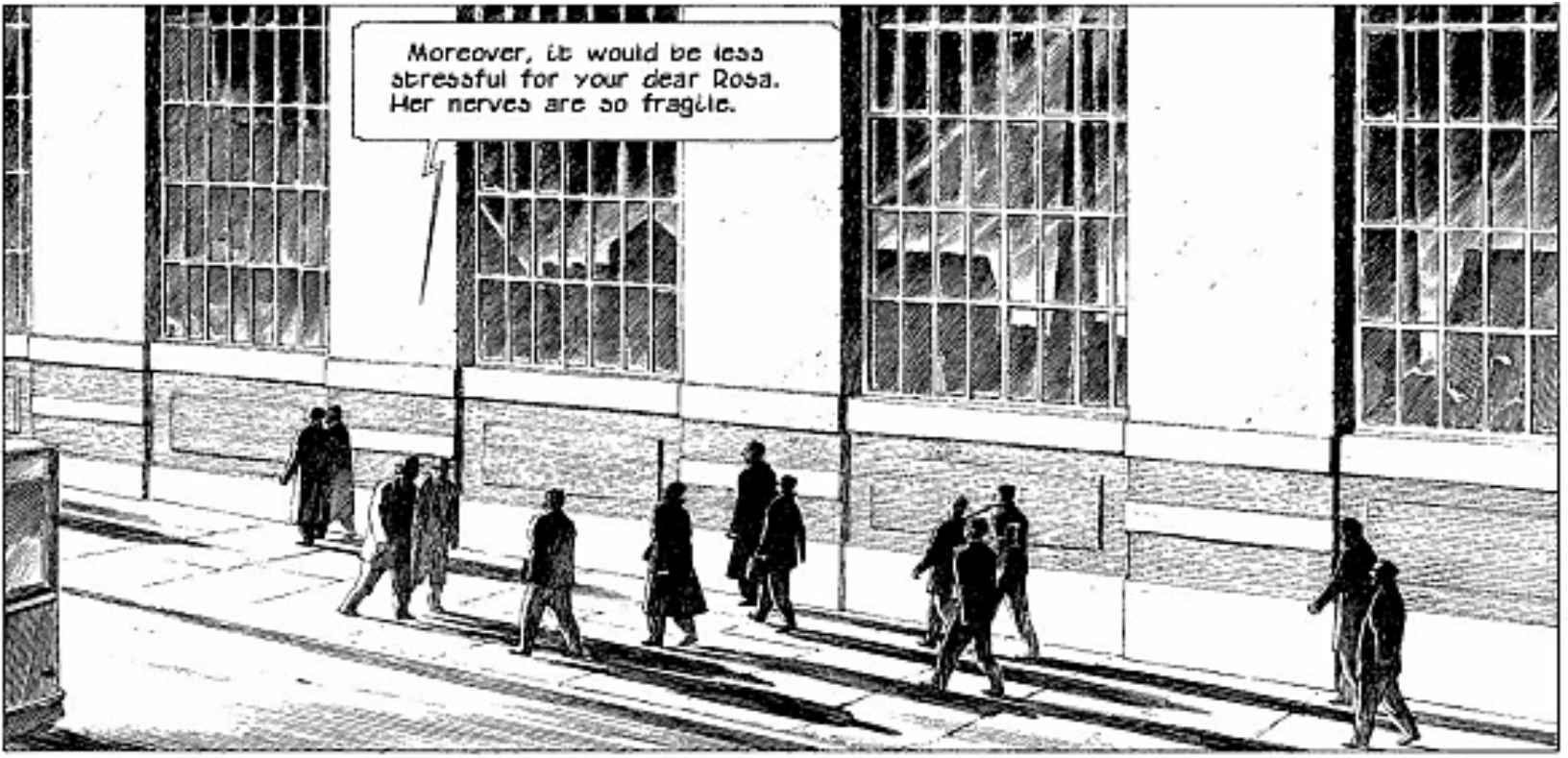
My good old teacher, Gerome, would scream if he were to see me here,
sketching out a design of a big stone like a fool.
And to make it worse, I just can't seem to draw it level!

MYLOS
September 26th
MARY! MARY!
All right... I'm coming!

Mary, the doctor has important things to do. You are wasting his time.
He came a long way to see you.
Don't you worry about me!
All the same, it's high time she learns to mind.
Mary is full of mischief. The child will come up with anything to get attention.
Here I am!
?!
Kurt, that's enough piano. We need to focus on Mary now.
But Papa...

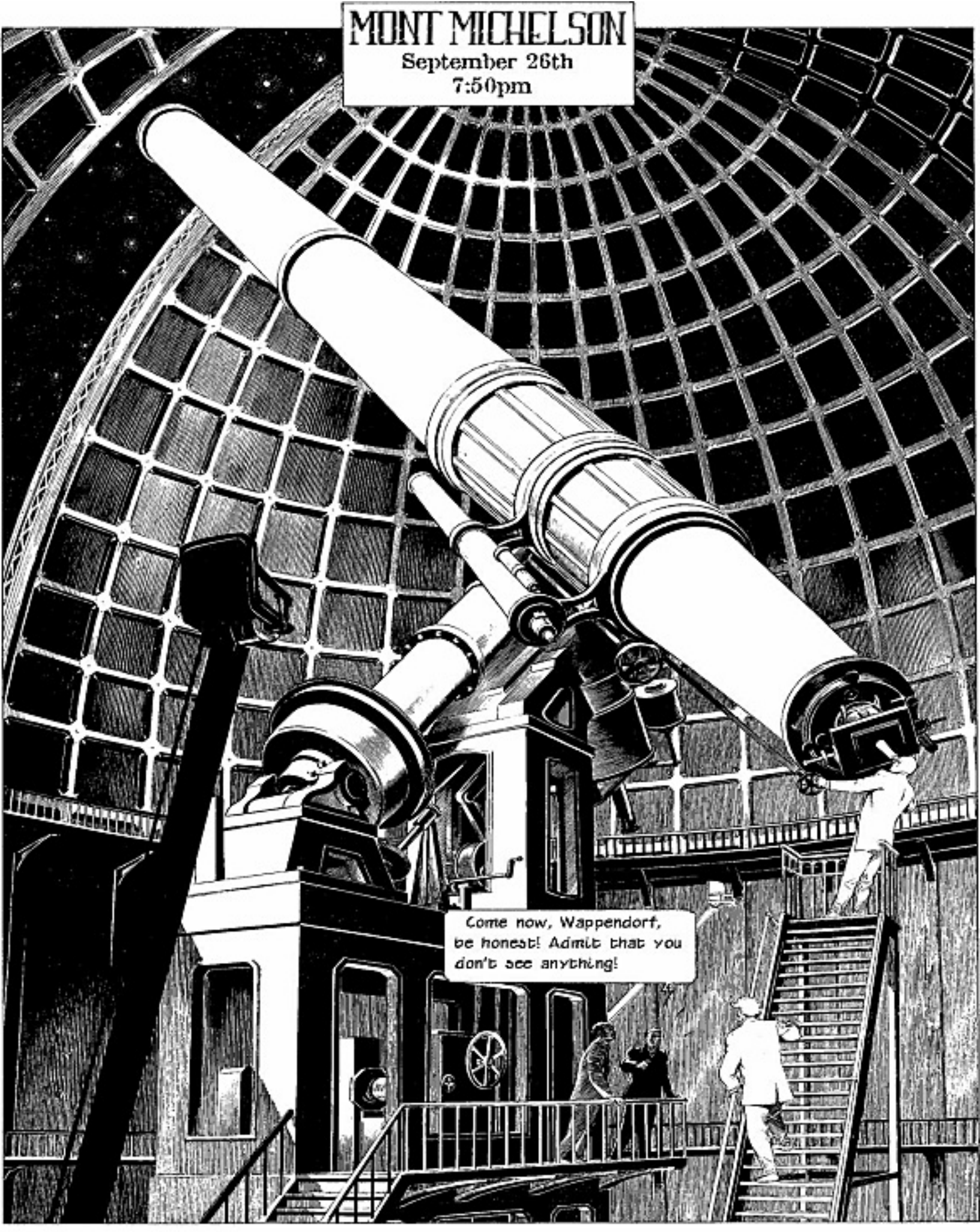
Hmm...Come, Mary, lie down! We're going to take your temperature.
So, you came up with a good idea to not go to school?
Mmmm...
She doesn't have a fever...
What did I say? It is all an act to get her father's attention.
On the contrary, Madam, there is something very wrong with her.
I don't hurt at all, except in my feet...
It doesn't really surprise me. She's never been very even-keeled. But she is not pretending.
That's fine, Mary, you can get dressed again... Mr. Von Rathen, I'd like to see you for a moment.

Honestly, Dr. Texier, can you figure out what's wrong with her?
Hmm... Part of it could be a put-on, it's possible. Your daughter has always been a character...
But we'll also have to take into account the climatic conditions of Mylos and normal growth issues. This could be a form of osteoporosis.
We could, of course, consider a corrective corset and a vitamin cure... But I think the best medicine would be a change of air... Country air!
Country air?!!?
I know of an excellent boarding school, very well-respected, near Sodrovni... Two or three years there and everything will be back to order.

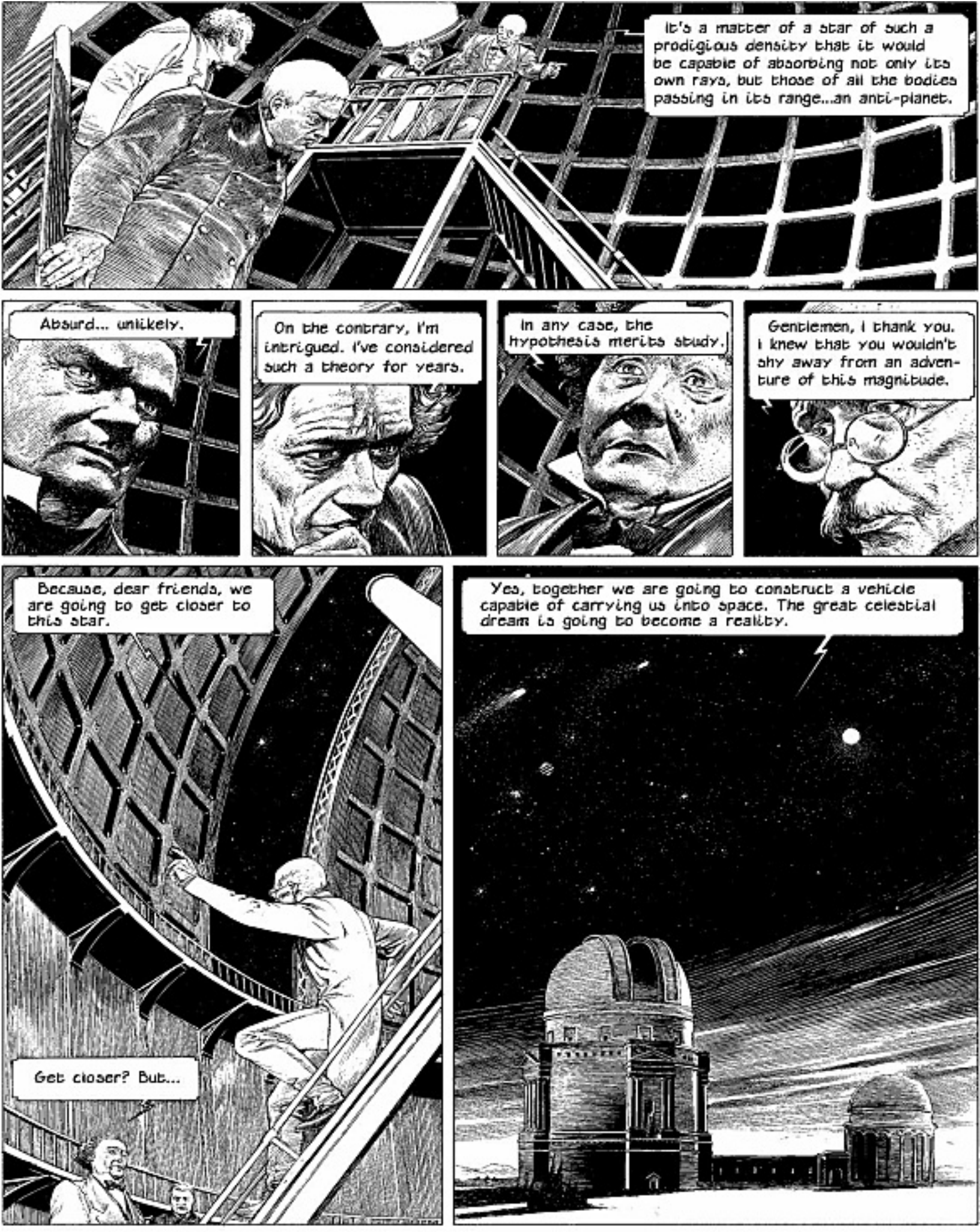

Moreover, it would be less stressful for your dear Rosa. Her nerves are so fragile.

My wife is selfish and has no patience for her own daughter. I'd rather send her away. But it may be good for my Mary.

Mary! Come on, it's time to eat!
I don't want to go to a boarding school! I never have any luck.

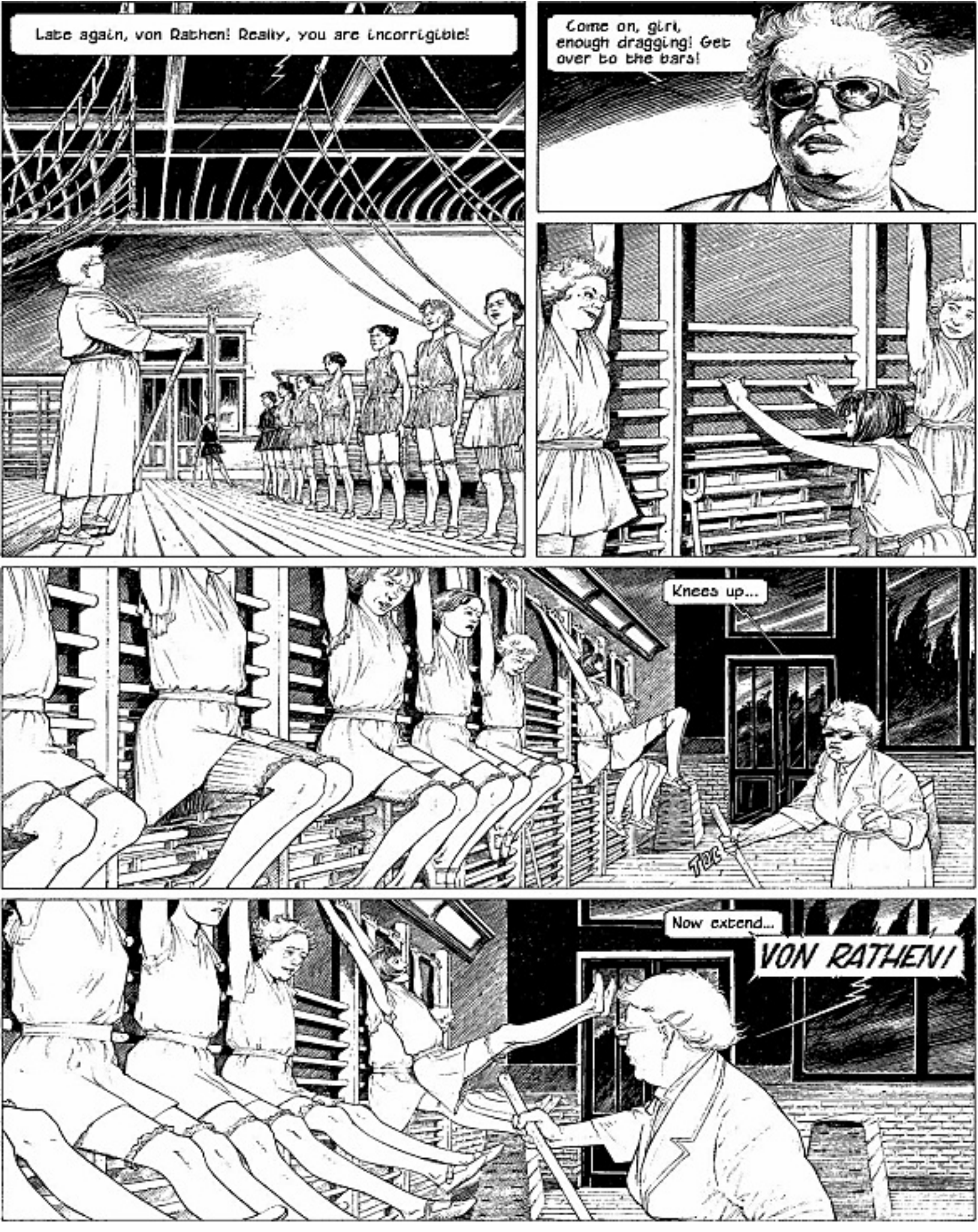

MONT MICHELSON
September 26th
7:50pm
Come now, Wappendorf, be honest! Admit that you don't see anything!

I'm surprised at you, Mr. Chlowsky. Science, my friend, has little to do with the obvious and more to do with the unseen.
Ohhh!
Enough theorizing, Wappendorf! Please present some facts!
The phenomenon three weeks ago had all the characteristics of an eclipse, except we could not see what was obscuring the sun.
All evidence points to this mysterious object's existence, and the data gathered here should permit us to calculate its position and its mass.
We can measure its effects, study the force field that appears to confirm its existence. Yes, dear colleagues, all the recent incidents lead to the formulation of this hypothesis...


It's a matter of a star of such a prodigious density that it would be capable of absorbing not only its own rays, but those of all the bodies passing in its range...an anti-planet.
Absurd... unlikely.
On the contrary, I'm intrigued. I've considered such a theory for years.
In any case, the hypothesis merits study.
Gentlemen, I thank you. I knew that you wouldn't shy away from an adventure of this magnitude.
Because, dear friends, we are going to get closer to this star.
Get closer? But...
Yes, together we are going to construct a vehicle capable of carrying us into space. The great celestial dream is going to become a reality.

PENSION NORDMAN
(Nordmon Boarding School)
November 12th
4:10pm
Look at her with her crutch! She is pathetic.
This is going to be fun!

Come on, Mary, get a move on it! You're going to be late again...
Oh, all right, leave me alone! I'm coming.
Ha ha!
Always up to your tricks, von Rathen! You're starting to get on my nerves, young lady!
But, ma'am...
There are no buts! Get yourself to the gymnasium right now!

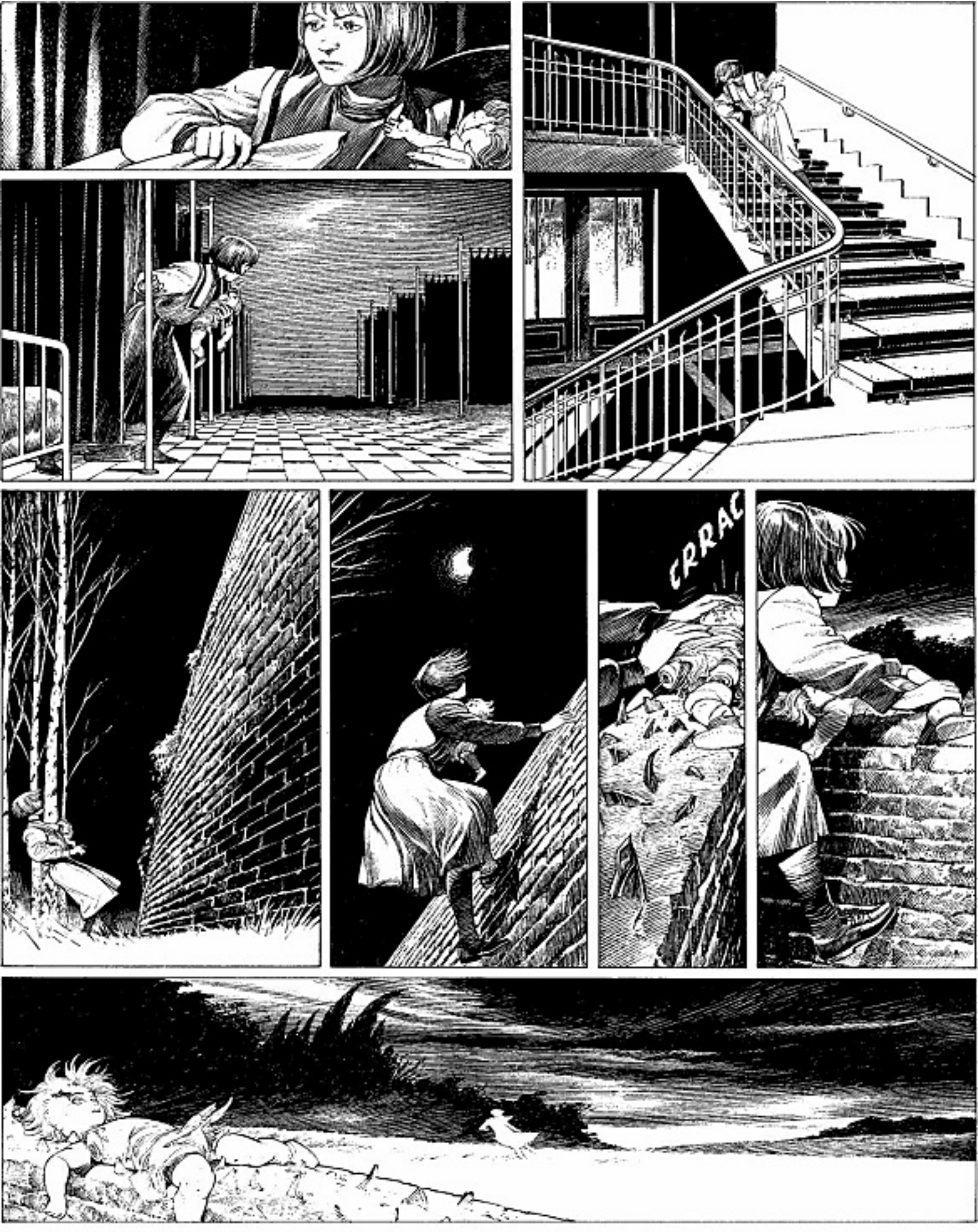

Late again, von Rathen! Really, you are incorrigible!
Come on, girl, enough dragging! Get over to the bars!
Knees up...
TEK
Now extend...
VON RATHEN!

I've never liked willful ones, girl...
I suggest you stop this foolishness.
We're starting to get tired of you here!
Next exercise! Try to concentrate this time!
Come on, Caroline, stand up now! Christine, that's very good...
?!

Mary von Rathen, you are completely mad. Stop this game right now!
We'll make you walk straight, girlie, even if we have to tie you to a board.
Get dressed again right now and go straight to the principal's office!
DIRECTION*
Miss von Rathen! What have you done now?
You insist on being the center of attention in every class. We've tried to be patient with you, but this has to stop.
Young lady, you've given me no choice. As punishment for your behavior, I will be keeping you here during your next school holiday.

*Principal

?!
NO!
They'll pay for this!
So, are you happy with her?
She's like you now...
A broken mess!
Quiet, girls! It's 9 o'clock. I don't want to hear another word!


CRRAC

The High Plains
of Aubrac
November 4th, 1898

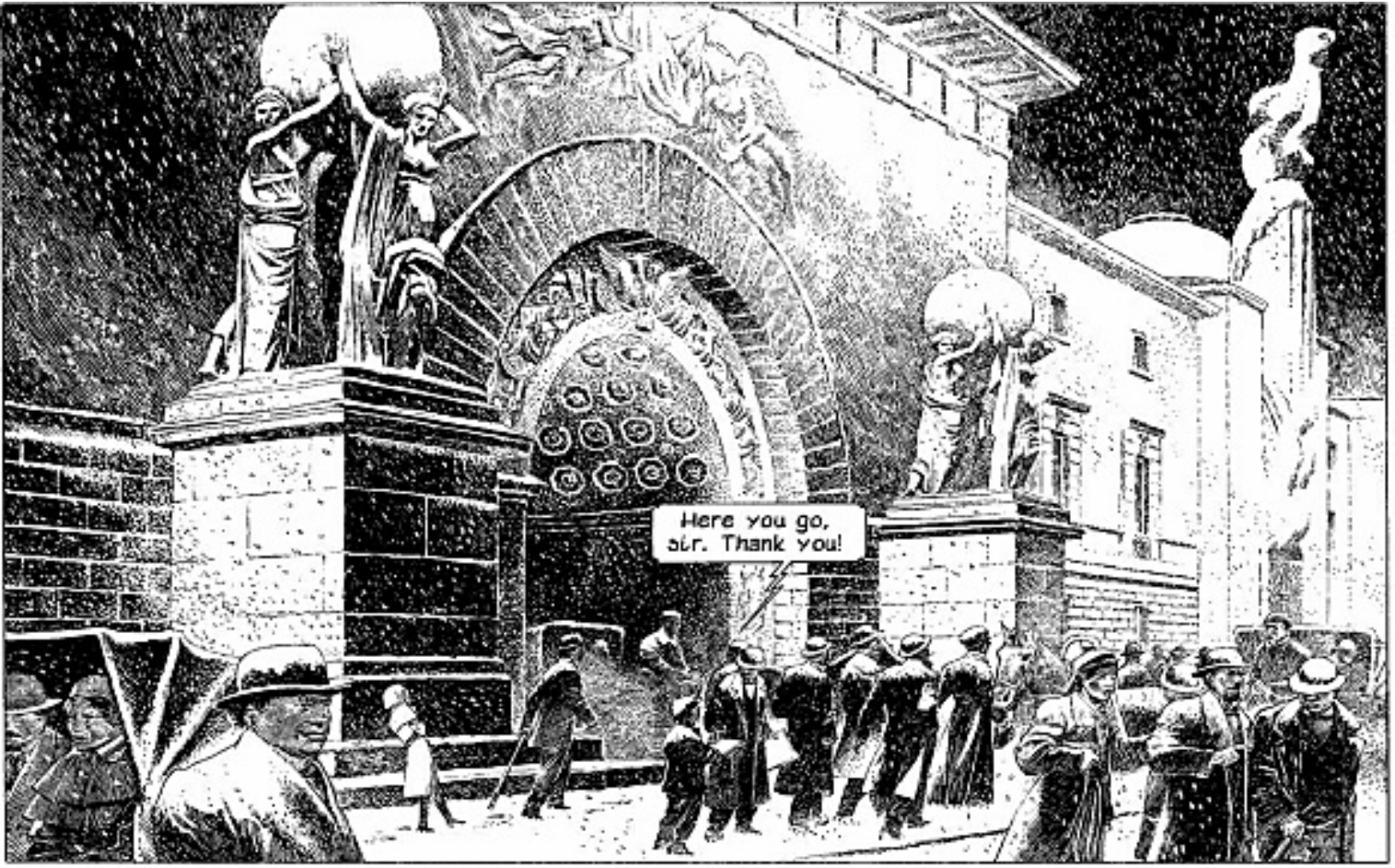
I received a letter from Florence this morning.
She still believes it is that stupid review that drove me away.
It is really sad how little she understands about me.

My journey led me to this abandoned house.
Why would anyone build such a large mansion
in the middle of nowhere?

I spent hours studying this house,
trying to steal a glance of its interior through the closed shutters.
Its proportions are grandiose.

It is as if this house has been calling out to me,
drawing me in. It is hard to resist. Tomorrow I will meet
with the estate agent to see about buying it.

SUDROVNI
November 22nd
4:05pm
Extra! Get your "Les Echo des Cities" here. Extra! Inauguration of Alta Plana, the new archival city!



*MISSING PERSON Disappeared on November 12th From the Nordman Boarding School
*The Cities' Echo. Inauguration of Alta Plana.

Hey, what's all this commotion?
?
Watch where you're going, you little freak!
CRI
Nastassja, pluck the strings more delicately, please. Again, from the top.

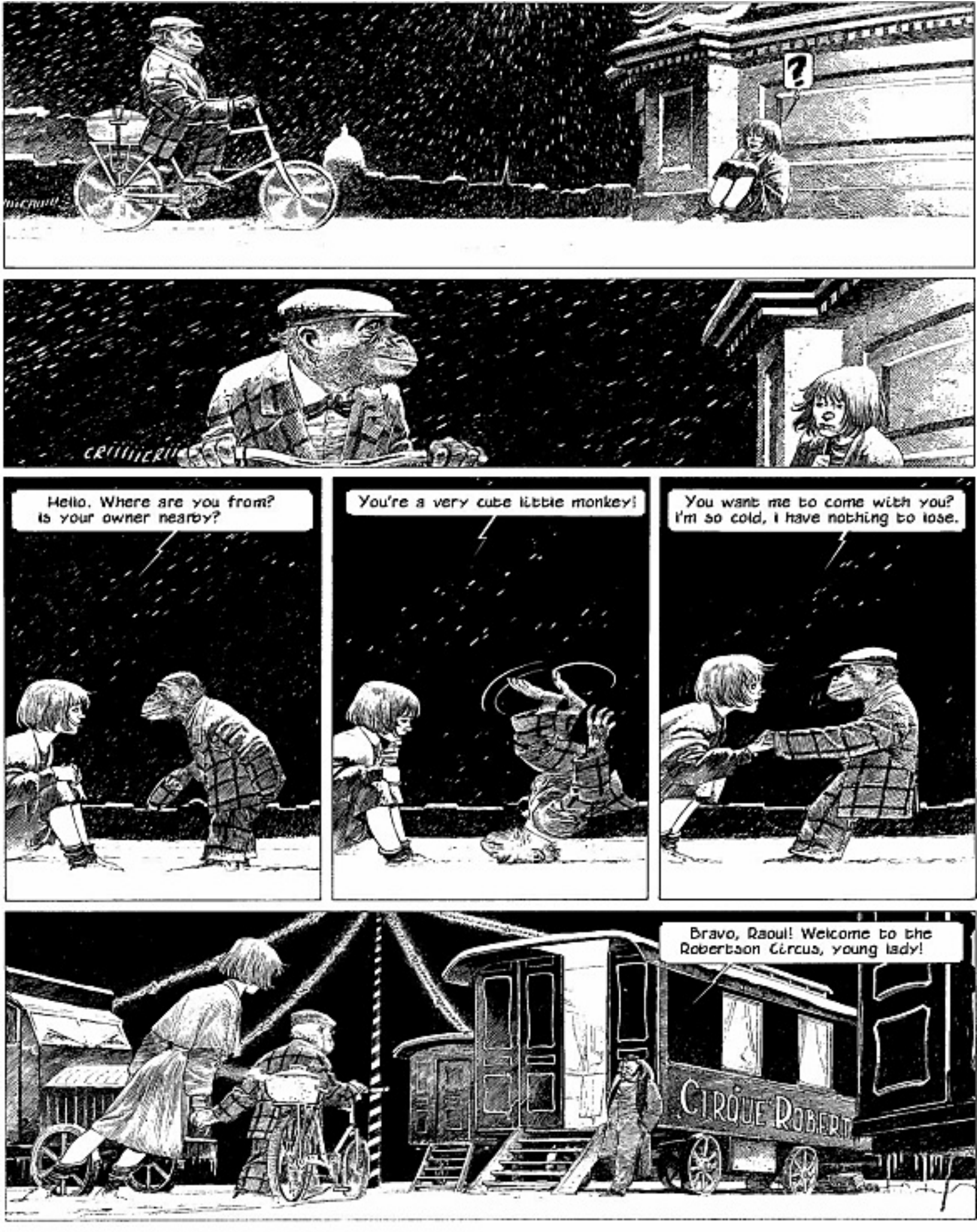
Young ladies, I must ask for more concentration from you. If not, you'll never be ready for the Governor's visit.
?
RRRR
Sir! Sir! Look at her!
!

Who? What is it? Why are you disrupting my workshop?
"Venus and the Beggar," it would be a great painting!
... Don't you agree?
Ha, ha, ha!
You have atrocious taste, Fedor! You'll never be more than an amateur painter!
As for you, you little scamp, get out of here! We don't give hand-outs, and you're too young to pose!
ACADEMIE

?
SOUPE POPULAIRE
!?
What's wrong with her?
She's got a rich person's clothes!
She's not from here, is she?
Look at her. She's all twisted.
She'll get all the attention.
We don't want you here. This is the soup line, not the circus!
Yeah, get out of here!

*Soup Kitchen

Yeah, that's right, there's barely enough for us as it is!
That's weird! I've never seen anything like it.


?
Hello. Where are you from? Is your owner nearby?
You're a very cute little monkey!
You want me to come with you? I'm so cold, I have nothing to lose.
Bravo, Raoul! Welcome to the Robertson Circus, young lady!
CIRQUE ROBERT

Uhh... Hello, sir. Mr...
Robertson... Edgar Robertson. It's strange, ever since I saw you in the Alaxis park, I knew we'd find one another again.
Please, young lady... make yourself at home. Let me introduce you to all our troop.
This is Tharcissius, our businessman...
Pierre and Dany, who never do anything halfway...
Madame Alice, who has the biggest heart in the world.
...and Mr. Raoul, whom you've already met.
What's your name?
It's Mary.
How beautiful she is!
Eat, Mary, you must be hungry... We'll worry about your costume later.

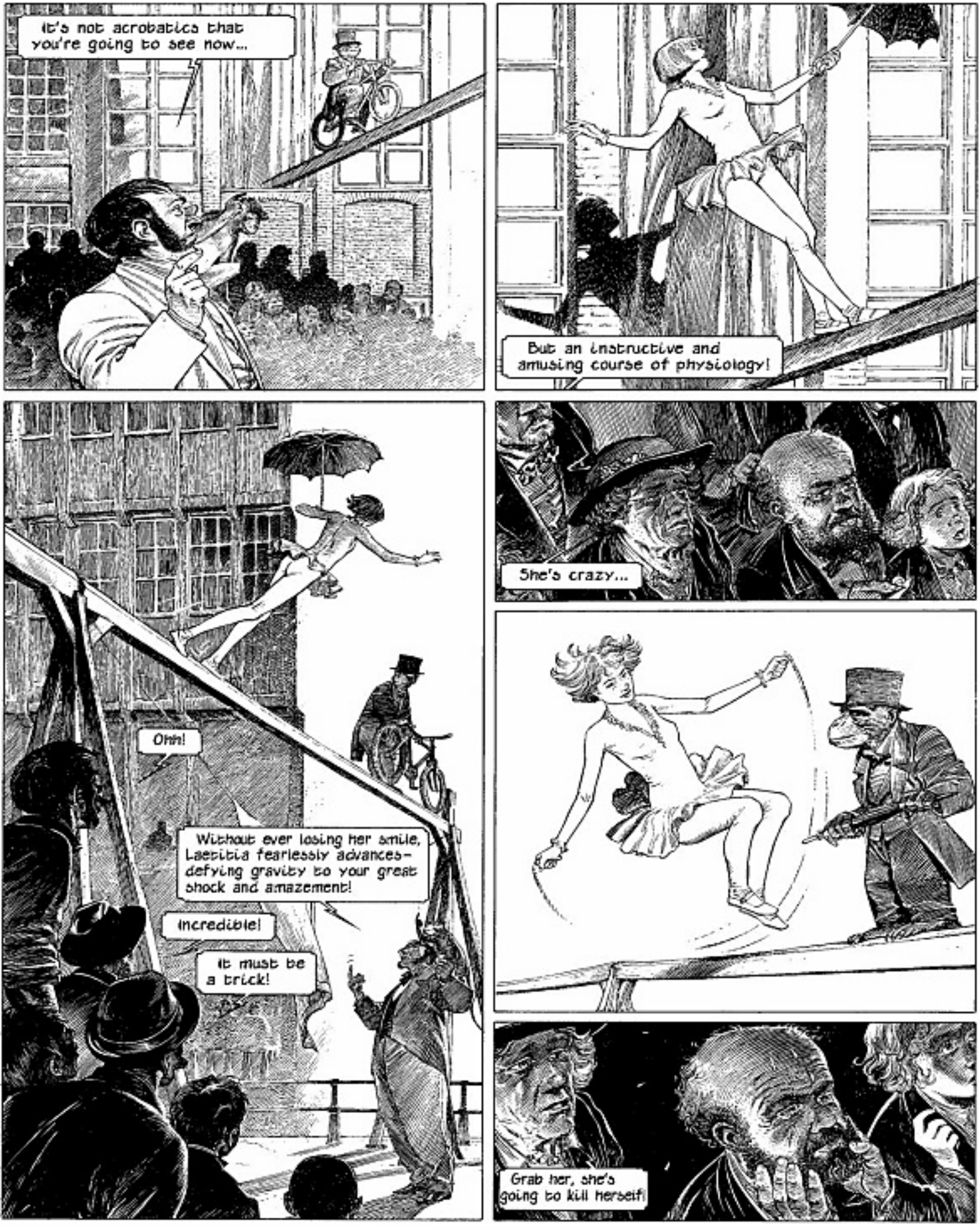
MONT MICHELSON
April 12th, 753
6:20pm
Axel, you know I've always supported you, even to the point of having a fall-out with Chlowsky... But this time, I must insist!

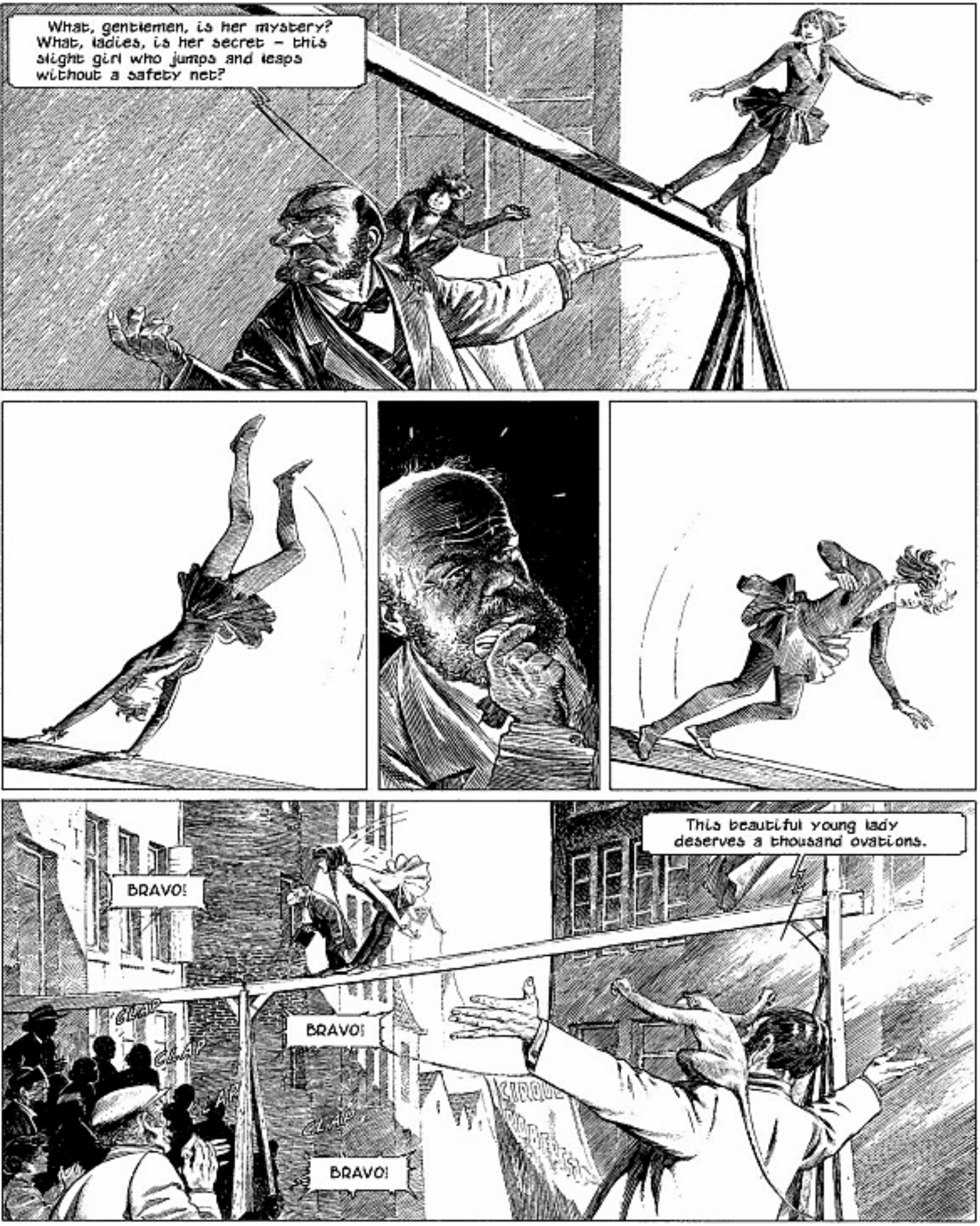
... Supposing that the celestial missile reaches the anti-planet without damage, nothing says that we could get back.
Get back!?
Good Lord! Why are you all talking about coming back while we're still far from having gone? With people like you, neither Armilia nor the Cayius Archipelago could have been discovered.
Come back!?! Let's trust in the people of the other world to furnish us with the means!
But Axel, nothing says that this planet is inhabited, nor that it is habitable!
I've already answered that question.
Enough delays, Fritz! You're telling me that you're abandoning me, that you won't be on the Antinea expedition... It's not important! I'll journey alone if I have to!

Axel, Axel, we're not at that point yet...
Yes, we are! It's too late to go back. I have committed myself personally to General Morgan! I won't go back on my word.
But the launching of a first rocket, without an occupant, would allow...
An empty shell would teach us nothing!
I want to see this planet with my own eyes. I want to tread on it with my own feet.

PORRENTRUY
May 2nd
5:05pm
Ladies and Gentlemen! Boys and Girls! Welcome to my circus of a thousand thrills! You will not be disappointed!

*Poster and sign: Robertson Circus — Sensational Attractions and Robertson Circus: Laetitia the OFKiller


It's not acrobatics that you're going to see now...
But an instructive and amusing course of physiology!
She's crazy...
Ohh!
Without ever losing her smile, Laetitia fearlessly advances- defying gravity to your great shock and amazement!
Incredible!
It must be a trick!
Grab her, she's going to kill herself!


What, gentlemen, is her mystery? What, ladies, is her secret – this slight girl who jumps and leaps without a safety net?
This beautiful young lady deserves a thousand ovations.
BRAVO!
BRAVO!
BRAVO!
CLAP
CLAP
CLAP
CLAP

Feast your eyes on the two-headed man. Two mouths to feed and two pairs of eyes to see. Two heads are better than one!
Miss Laetitia... Miss Laetitia...
Yes...what is it?
Allow me to introduce myself. I am Stanislas Sainclair, chief-editor of "Le Echo des Cités"! I found your act fascinating. I'd like to chat with you.
Oh... I'm nothing special. I don't have much to tell.
Excuse me for asking you this question, but have you been like that for a long time?
Uhh! It's been years!
Strange...very strange... I've heard tell of other cases just like yours, but much more recent.
Other people... leaning like me... Oh, that's marvelous! Do you think I could meet them?

If you only knew how lonely I am... Everyone's kind, but I don't belong here.
Oh, I do understand you... When I was a child, I almost became a sideshow attraction.
Do you think it's curable? If it is, I could go home.
Honestly, I don't know. In my opinion, only one man could help you, but...
But...
He's such an eccentric character.
Oh sir, please won't you tell me his name?
His name is Wappendorf, Axel Wappendorf... If he hasn't closed up shop yet, he should be at the Mount Michelson Observatory, near Alaxis.
Oh, it's so far... And yet, I must go see him!
Goodbye, Mr. Saintclair. You'll never know how grateful I am for this talk.
Goodbye, Laetitia. Good luck!
BERTSON

Wonderful! What a success! Our best take in three months!
Mr. Robertson! What are you doing in here? I'm fed up with everyone coming into my trailer.
We are your family, Mary. We built this leaning trailer just for you. Please be nice!
That is exactly what I was saying, this is my space here!
I'm sorry. I'll go. What a temper!
Don't worry. You won't have to deal with my temper much longer. I refuse to grow old here!
But what are you saying?...
You understood perfectly!
You can't abandon me! The circus depends on you. It's you that people want to see.
They're arguing?
No, they're just pretending.

Soon people will come from all over the continent just to see you. We could build a real bigtop.
I don't care.
Remember when I found you in Sodrovni? You were cold and hungry. We've all grown so close these past few years.
I know. I'm sorry. But I miss my papa and my family. I want to be normal again, so they'll let me come home.
Oh Raoul, how I'm going to miss you!
What an ingrate!
What? She's really going to leave?
She's right. I'm going to leave one day, too.
Oh you, if only it were true...
Let's go! We've waited around here long enough!
Lolita

The High Plains of Aubrac

November 26th, 1898

It is getting colder and the dampness is causing the wall plaster to dry slower than I would like. But soon... soon I will begin work on my masterpiece.

People around here think I'm mad. As inexpensive as this estate was to buy, the locals seem to find my purchase excessive.

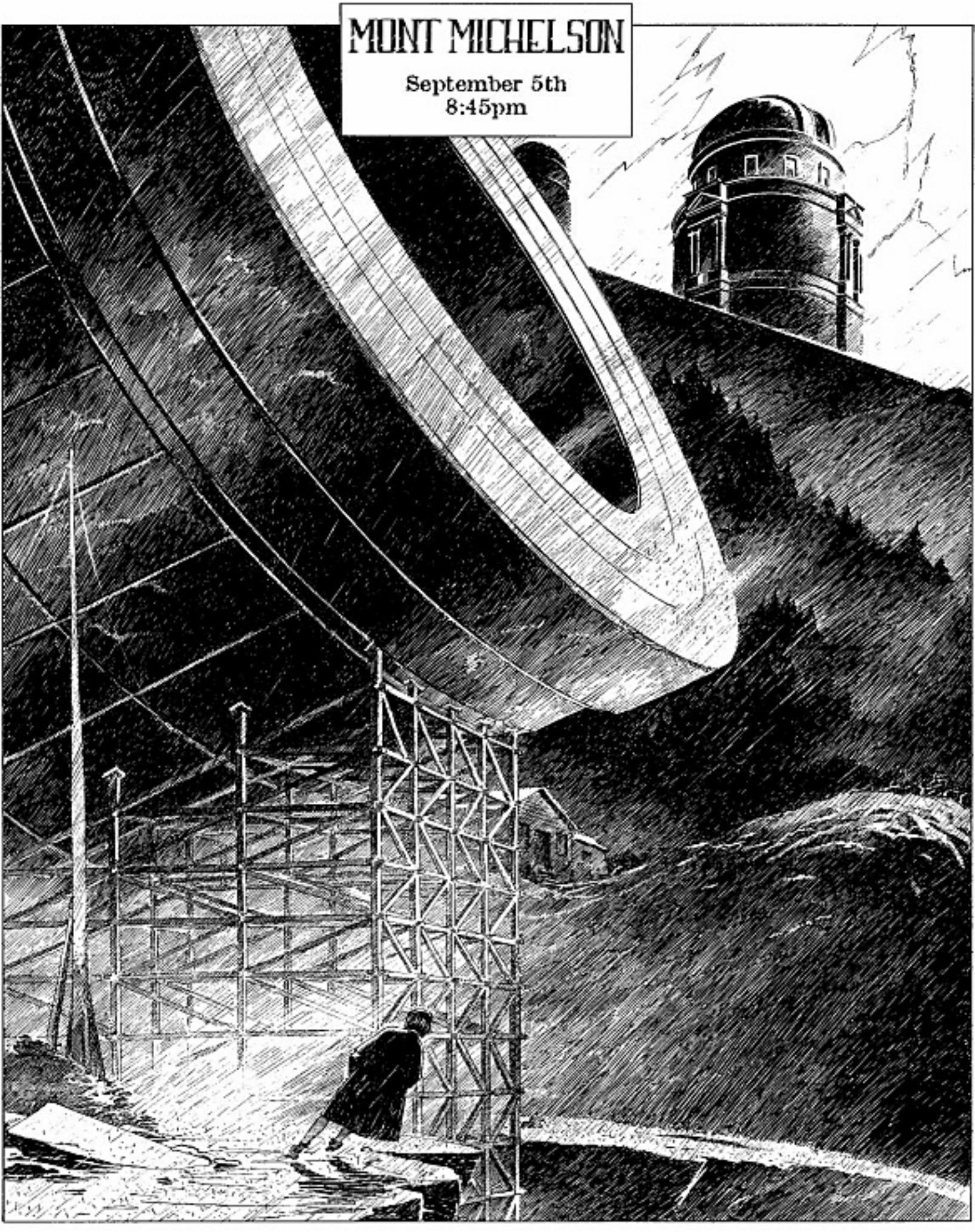
It is so strange how the image just comes to me. I am beginning to feel as if the art is drawing itself under my finger tips.

MYLOS
August 17th
6:20pm
Good heavens! It's her! Look! It's Mary!
What's wrong with him now?

Oh, thank goodness! This is wonderful!
L'Echo des C
LAETITIA LA DESAXE
Une attraction sensationne
au Cirque Robertson *
It's Mary, beyond the shadow of a doubt!
Klaus! Watch out for the cards!
For once, I was winning! You did that on purpose.
It must be Mary, always the center of attention!
That's your sister?
It looks like her a bit...
Laetitia? You told me her name was Mary.
It's Mary! Here's the proof. She's alive, very much alive. I had all but given up hope. My dear little child... I hope she can forgive me!

*The Cities' Echo — *Laetitia the Off-Kilter: A Sensational Attraction at the Robertson Circus*

There's no time to waste now. I'm leaving immediately to look for her.
That's absurd. Send someone. You have responsibilities!
Good Lord, Rosa! You're so heartless! She's your daughter too!
And the Consortium, who's going to take care of it?
Kurt will replace me. It will do him a lot of good.
Kurt, you are going to have to face an extremely difficult test, but it will be educational. I'm sure that you are perfectly capable.
Yes, Papa, you can count on me.
As long as you're at the consortium, take advantage of the opportunity to find yourself a wife!
Yes, Papa.


MONT MICHELSON
September 5th
8:45pm

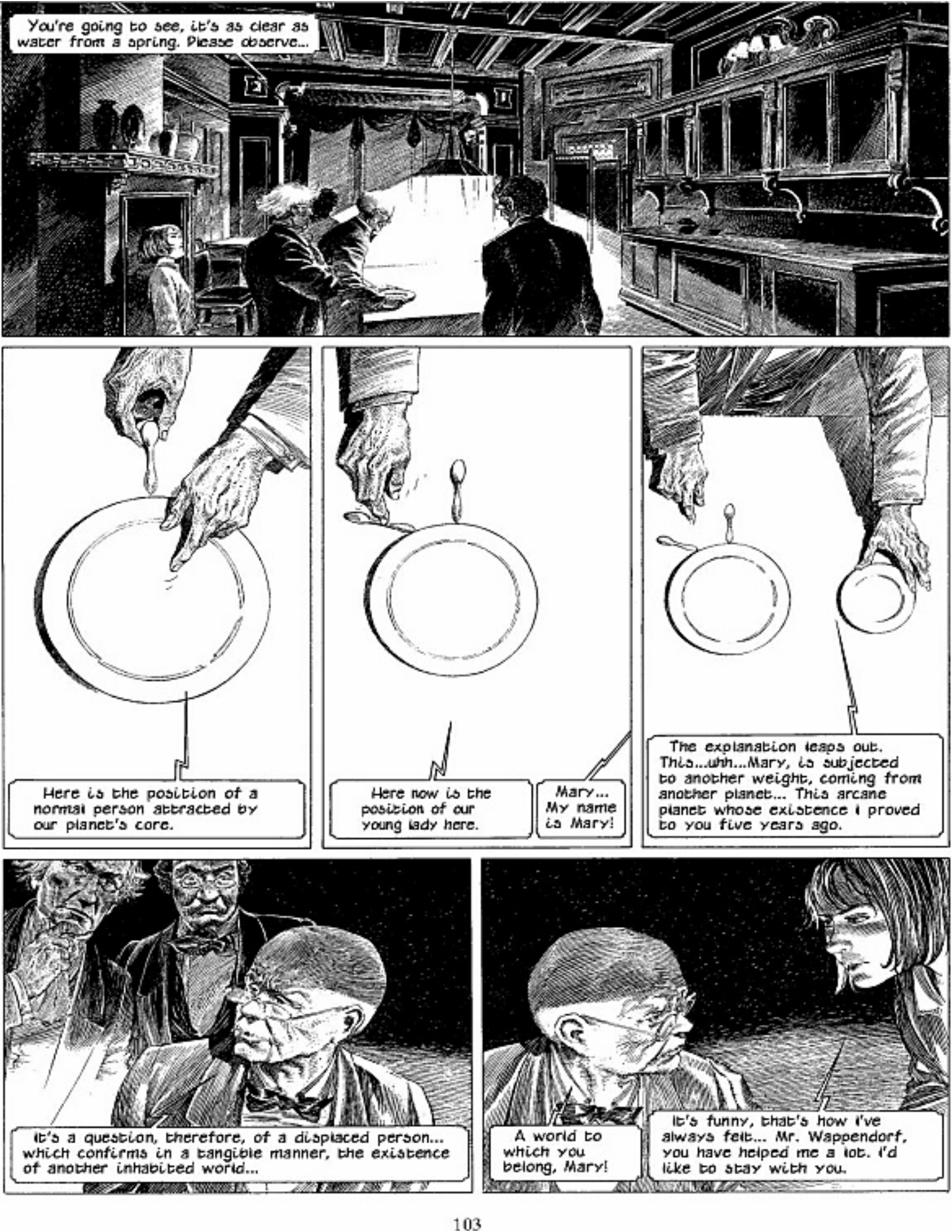
BONG
BONG
I'm looking for Mr. Wappendorf. is he here, please?
A young lady to see Mr. Wappendorf... Interesting.
Are you expecting someone, Axel?
A young lady, you sly dog!
I assure you, I'm not.

Good evening, sir. My name is Mary. Mr. Sainclair told me that you might be able to help me.
!
Me? Help you? I'm very flattered, but I really don't see how...
Look at me! People claim that I'm abnormal.
?
You see, I'm leaning...
...always at the same angle.
I've been this way for five years.
Extraordinary... Quite a remarkable phenomenon.
I think it's a cheap trick.

Stand in the light there, on the table! Let us conduct some experiments.
It'd be better if she undressed...
Uhm, no! I'm sorry. I'll just leave. This was a mistake.
No, please don't go! Excuse my colleague, he knows nothing about these things!
These clothes, Soeren, give us a precious indication.
Look! They are not governed by the same inclination as her body.

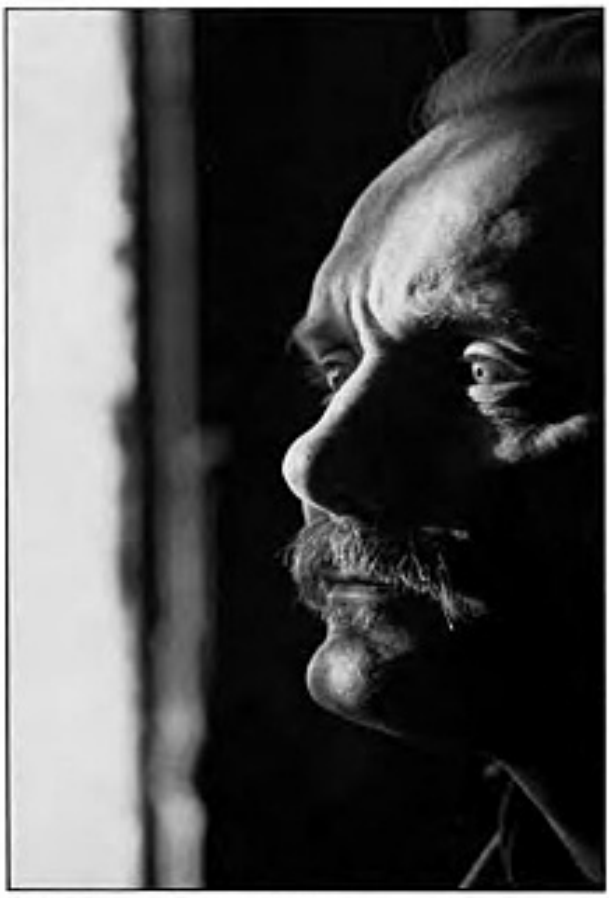
Her hair, on the other hand...
...immediately goes back into its leaning position.
For me, the conclusion is very clear...
A trick... Personally, I only see that...
Her legs seem normal, however.
I still think we'd see more clearly without all those clothes.
Stop touching me! I'm not an animal and I'm not stupid.
You're entirely correct, young lady. Please allow me one last experiment! Gentlemen, I need your help.

There... push her! Again! Now, Fritz, hold her securely!
Relax, young lady! Please trust me and don't resist!
But I'm going to fall...
There we go!
Everyone, let go.
AAAH!
That's mean! I trusted you.
I'm sorry, young lady! But this is proof that you are going to make scientific history.


You're going to see, it's as clear as water from a spring. Please observe...
Here is the position of a normal person attracted by our planet's core.
Here now is the position of our young lady here.
Mary... My name is Mary!
The explanation leaps out. This...uhh...Mary, is subjected to another weight, coming from another planet... This arcane planet whose existence I proved to you five years ago.
It's a question, therefore, of a displaced person... which confirms in a tangible manner, the existence of another inhabited world...
A world to which you belong, Mary!
It's funny, that's how I've always felt... Mr. Wappendorf, you have helped me a lot. I'd like to stay with you.

The High Plains
of Aubrac
October 12th, 1899

This is so unusual. I would never have imagined such an image, nor imagined I could have painted it. It's as if the mural painted itself. I wonder what the critics would say about this one.



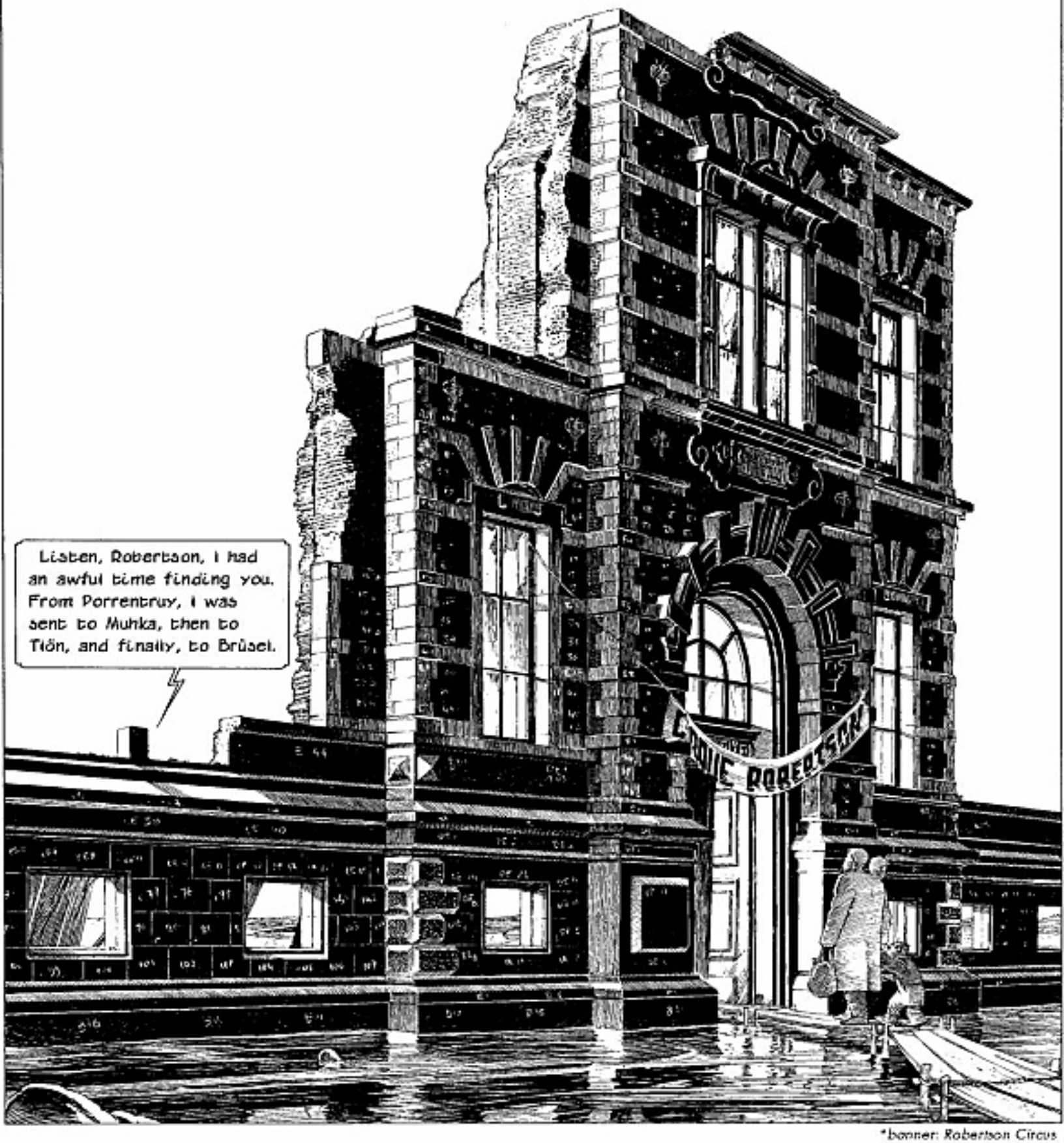
I'm convinced this house has a life of its own. I've sensed it all along. When I hold my ear to the wall, I can hear a hum, like muted echoes of otherworldly conversations.

At other times, it's the floor which starts droning. The noise increases, then breaks off. I will learn its secrets even if I have to tear this house apart piece by piece.

I am completely alone. No more letters or visits from Florence. No more days or nights. I am on my own schedule. The only thing that counts from now on, is the work that I must accomplish.

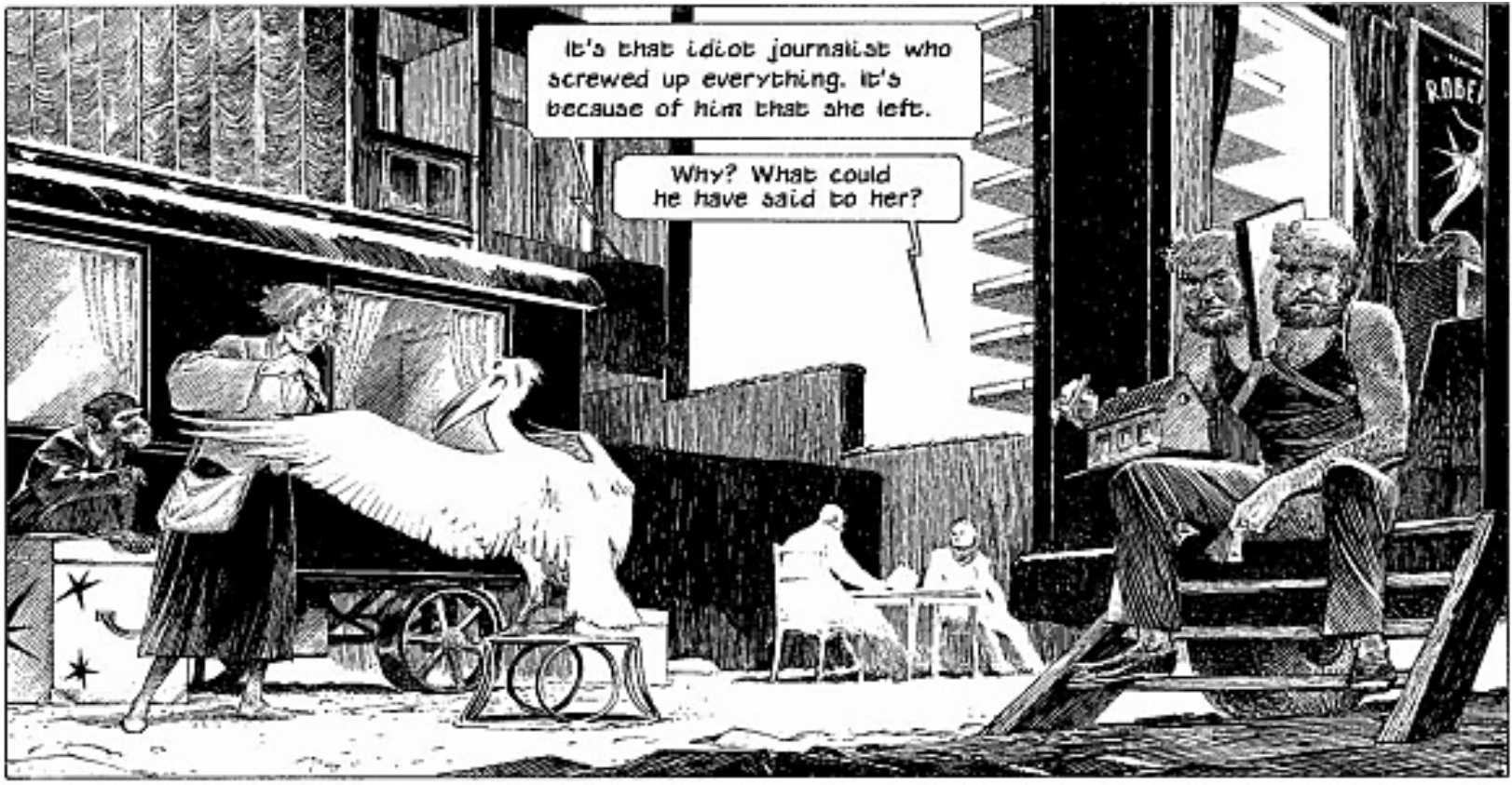
BRÜSEL

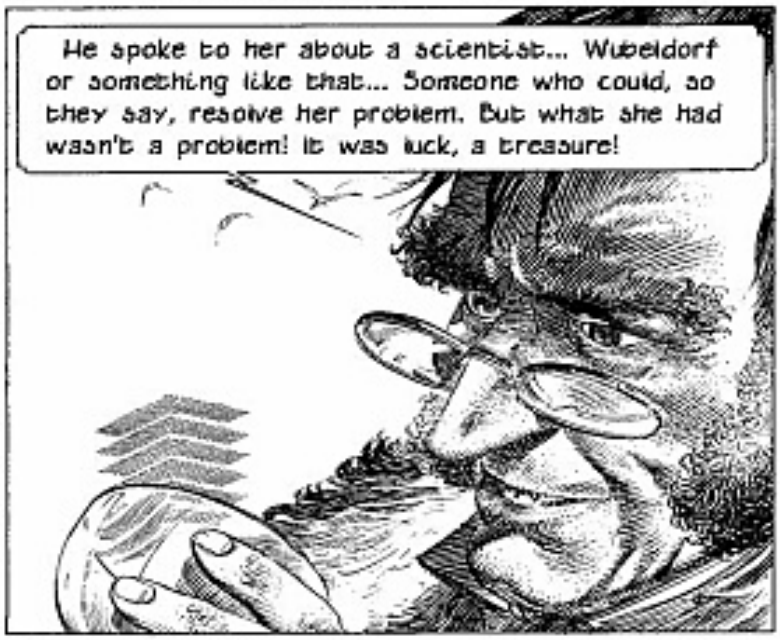
November 7th
11:45am


Listen, Robertson, I had an awful time finding you. From Porrentruy, I was sent to Muhka, then to Tiön, and finally, to Brüsel.
ROBERTSON

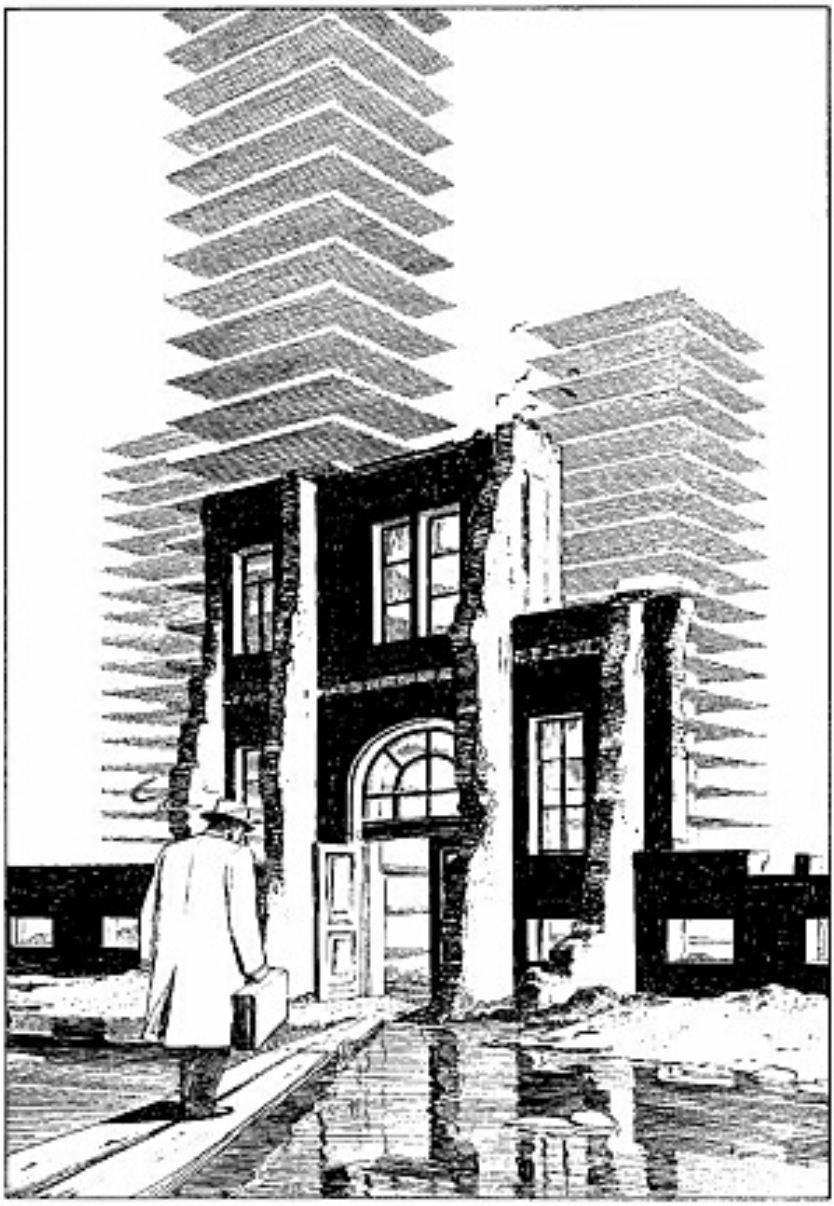
*banner: Robertson Circus

I've searched these lands in every direction, I arrive in this hole, and it's only to learn that Mary left the circus some months ago.
Believe me, I'm the first to regret it, Mr.... uhh...
Von Rathen. Klaus von Rathen.
Since Laetitia's departure, there has been no end of problems.
Madam Ailee has started to lose weight, Pierre and Dany have become depressed, and the public has evaporated.
What a star that girl was... a natural like you rarely see. But she was so selfish near the end.
Sir, that is my daughter you are talking about!


It's that idiot journalist who screwed up everything. It's because of him that she left.
Why? What could he have said to her?


He spoke to her about a scientist... Wubeldorf or something like that... Someone who could, so they say, resolve her problem. But what she had wasn't a problem! It was luck, a treasure!

Okay... well, the only thing for me to do is find this Wubedorf. I only hope I have better luck this time! Good day, sir.



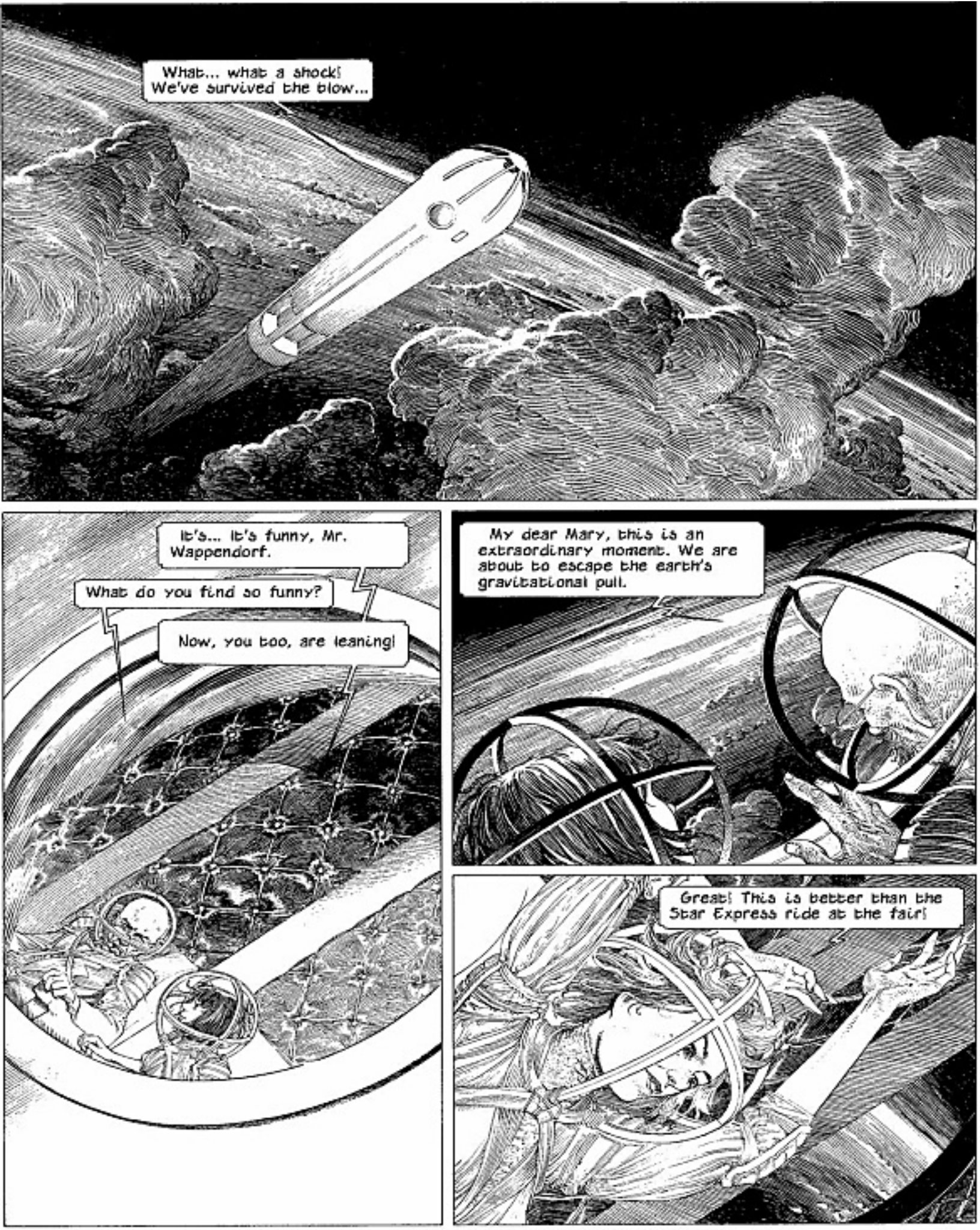
MONT MICHELSON
January 24th, 754
8:20pm
General, sir, everything is ready! The launch is in five minutes.

Ah, there you are, Wappendorf! I'm happy that you gave up that absurd idea of taking the young lady with you...
General, that's to say that...
It's all said and done! The army and women have never made good bedfellows, everyone knows that! This is a military mission, after all!
I know so very well, General. And history will be grateful to you for it...
Chlowsky had warned me of your obstinate nature. I'm pleased to see that you heeded my concerns.
Where is the girl, by the way?
Pouting as usual, I suspect. She has quite the temper!
Ah, yes! Then I should wish her future husband lots of luck!
Mr. Wappendorf, it's time.
Goodbye, General. Soon this flag will fly over the soil of Antinea...
Have a good trip, old chap!

Be brave, Wappendorf! It's only a reconnaissance mission. But the hour of conquest is at hand, I assure you! Most importantly, don't forget to send back the message rockets to inform us of your discoveries!
I'll be sure to!
General, sir, this fuse that you're going to light will set off thirty others...
With that single gesture, you will thus set free 6 million joules of energy... a veritable earthquake.
I have never been so proud to light the powder!
FIGHIII
Departure in three minutes!
Say, are you sure that we are running no risk?
Not in the least, General. We are protected by a quadruple layer of tempered glass.

CLANG!
!
MARY!
They've made a laughing stock of us!
Stop! Abort the mission!
It's too late!
BROOOOOOO
BRO

BOOM
Good Lord! That's what I call a smoking gun!
Gentlemen... gentlemen...
Please... my daughter... Mary. Where is she?
Far away!
That's your daughter, sir? I wouldn't be too proud of that, if I were you.
Good Lord! What's this? He's had a heart attack!


What... what a shock! We've survived the blow...
It's... it's funny, Mr. Wappendorf.
What do you find so funny?
Now, you too, are leaning!
My dear Mary, this is an extraordinary moment. We are about to escape the earth's gravitational pull.
Great! This is better than the Star Express ride at the fair!

Oh my! This kind of foolishness at my age...
I'm going to have to start slowing down one day.
What's happening?

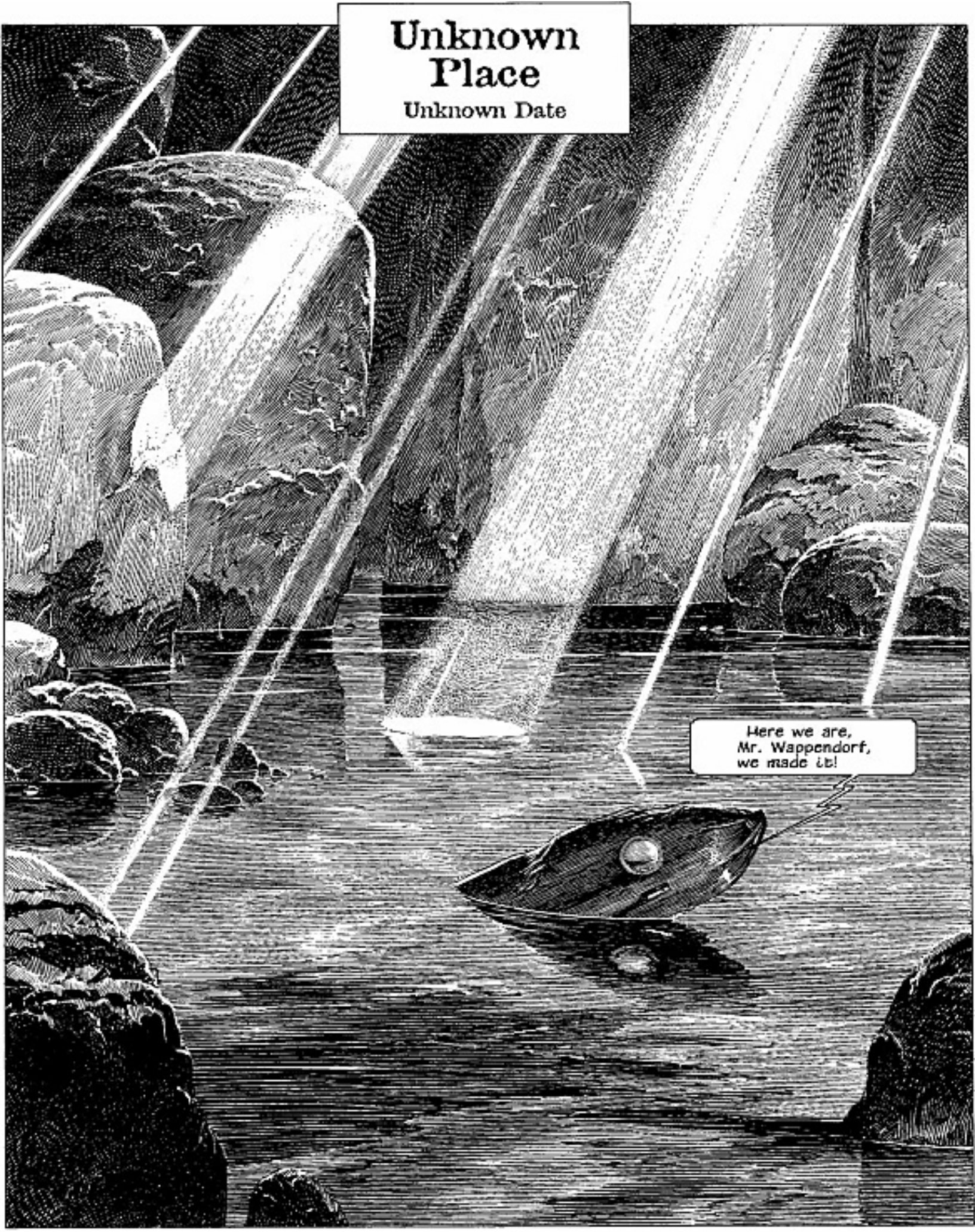
The High Plains
of Aubrac
December 23rd, 1899

Once again the visions of those spheres has come back to haunt me; this time, I did nothing to resist. They appear to me with such precision that I'd be incapable of painting anything else.

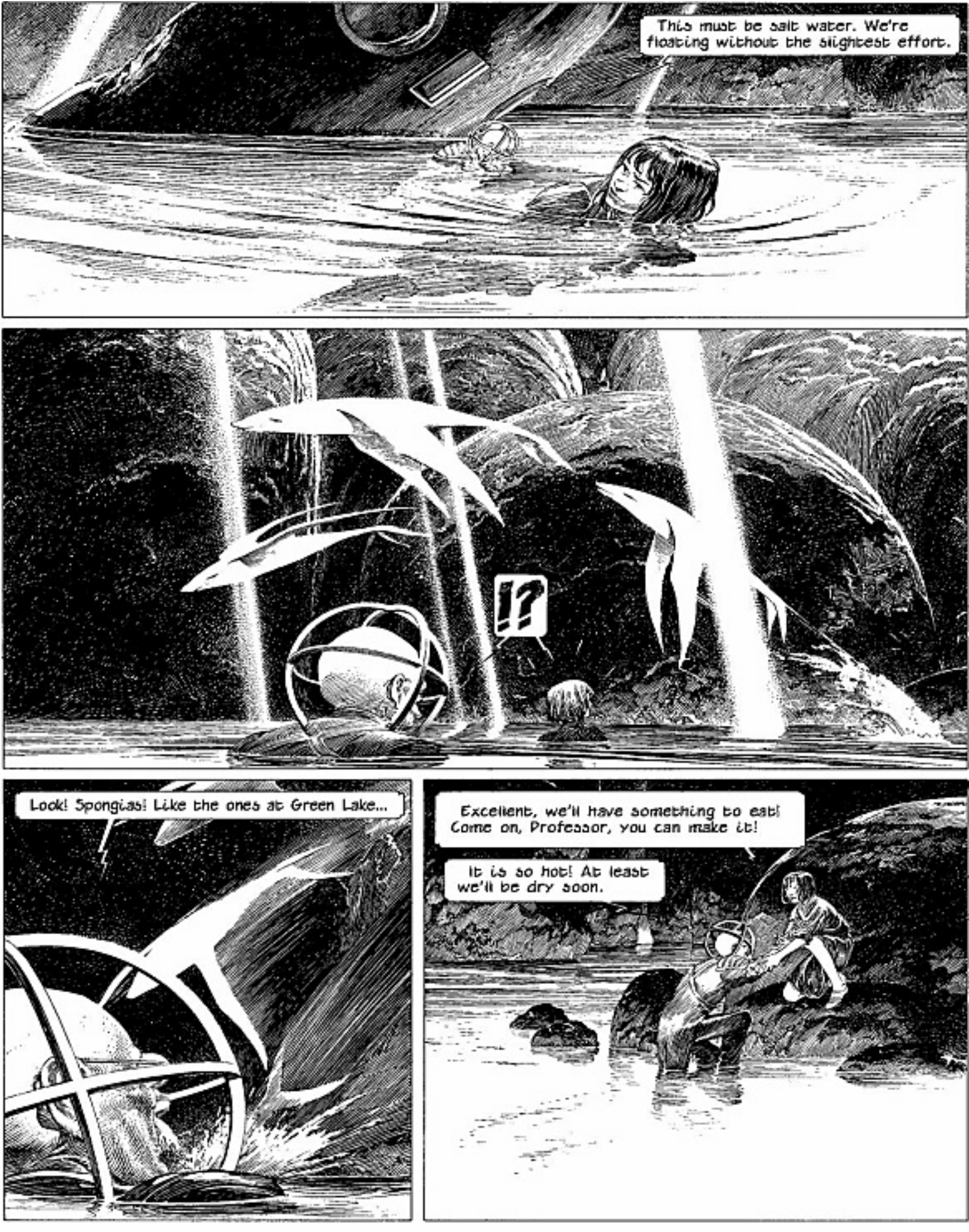
Why, in spite of myself, do my brushes keep going back to this solitary, creased sphere? The critics will be mocking me and my bizarre obsessions again. Or not rather: they will never see these frescoes. Once my task is finished, I will close the doors of this estate.

In this great room uniquely populated with spheres, I have suddenly felt the need to add a figure. Now I am certain that my 'Phoebus Child' has been a girl all along.

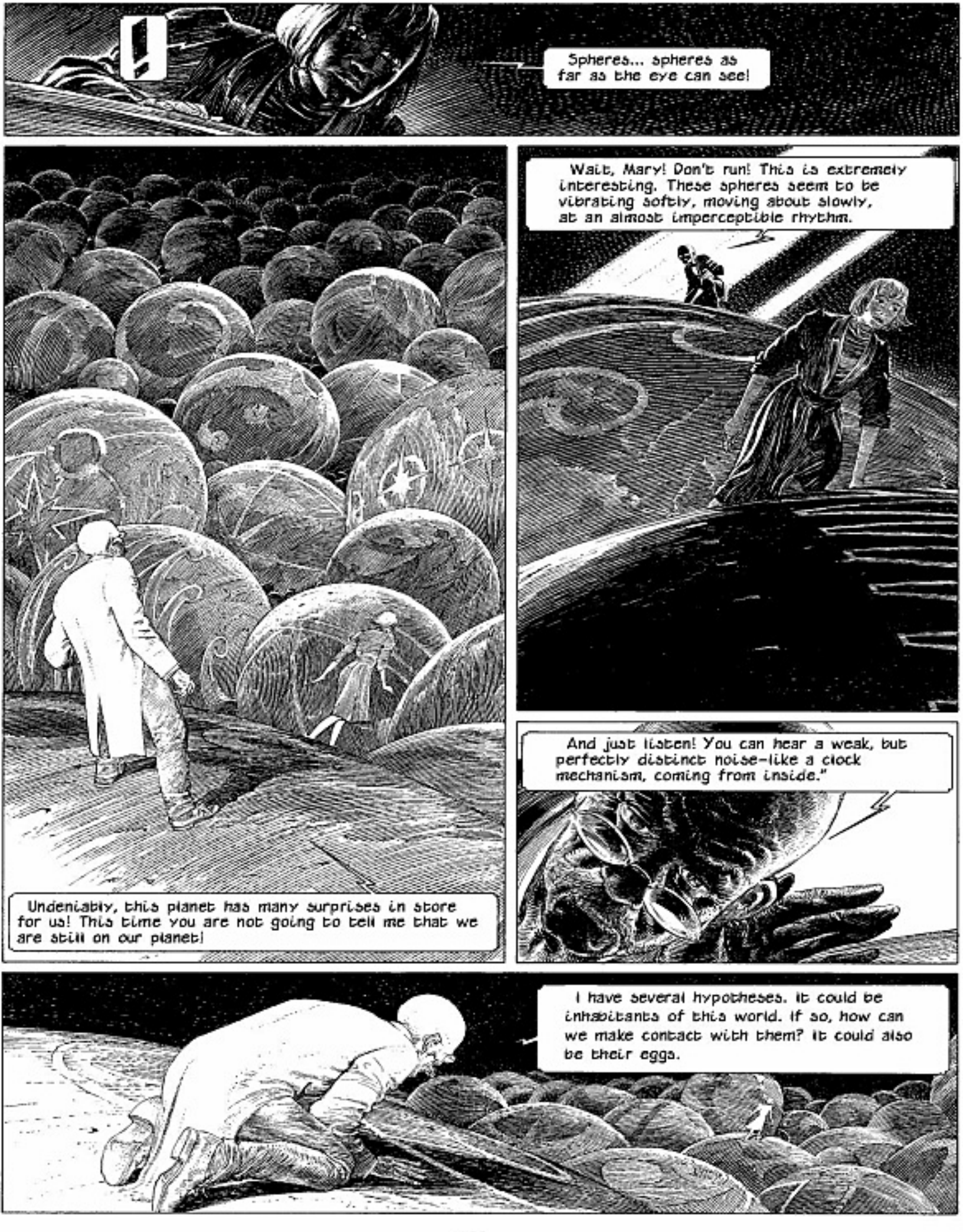
No matter how I try, though, I cannot visualize her face. Who is this girl? I need a model so desperately right now.


Unknown Place
Unknown Date
Here we are, Mr. Wappendorf, we made it!

Where are we? Is the atmosphere breathable?
It's a lake... a great, subterranean lake.
Don't touch it now! It's an unknown substance, dangerous perhaps...
But this is good water, I assure you.
Mary, no! She's lost! Oh my poor Mary!
Come on, Professor!


This must be salt water. We're floating without the slightest effort.
!?
Look! Spongias! Like the ones at Green Lake...
Excellent, we'll have something to eat! Come on, Professor, you can make it!
It is so hot! At least we'll be dry soon.

All the same, I wonder what this planet is that we've landed on... How unusual!
What planet? Professor, this is our own world, obviously.
Our world? Foolish little Mary!
Stop that! I'm not foolish. Think about it! The trip was very short. We fell almost instantly.
Hmm, the notion of time is always very disrupted in these kinds of cases... We are upon another planet, probably close by... A satellite, let's say... A satellite of which we are not aware.
But, Professor...
Mary, please! You don't know what you are talking about! I don't know why I wear myself out explaining everything to you.


!
Spheres... spheres as far as the eye can see!
Undeniably, this planet has many surprises in store for us! This time you are not going to tell me that we are still on our planet!
Wait, Mary! Don't run! This is extremely interesting. These spheres seem to be vibrating softly, moving about slowly, at an almost imperceptible rhythm.
And just listen! You can hear a weak, but perfectly distinct noise-like a clock mechanism, coming from inside."
I have several hypotheses. It could be inhabitants of this world. If so, how can we make contact with them? It could also be their eggs.

Wait for me, Mary! I need to do some calculations to determine our position.
It's this way, I can feel it... I am sure that this is the right path... just look, Professor, I'm leaning less!
What a crazy idea I had bringing her! This girl is going to kill me.
Over there! Look... smoke!
There's a passage between those two spheres... Someone must live in this area...
Hello? Is someone there?

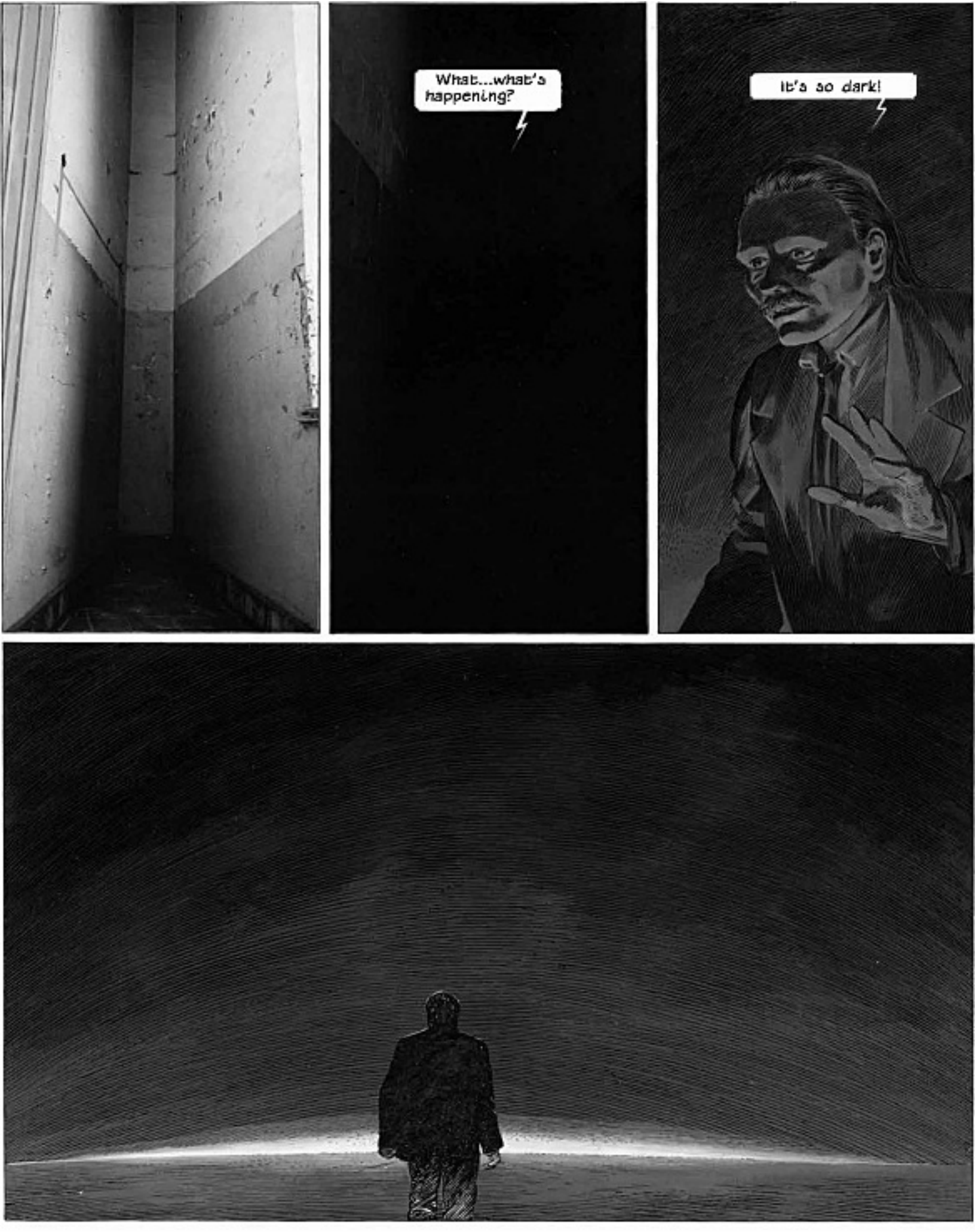
It's a campsite. The occupants can't be too far away.
Photography equipment, tools, some books... interesting!
There's even something to eat.
It's too bad everything's a mess!
Oh, my, the latest bound edition of "Science Tomorrow"!
An article on infra-conductors... That's really wonderful!
I'm going to look for these people... They can't be far away.
Be careful! I'll stay here and study this book. I can't go any further.

The High Plains
of Aubrac
January 3rd, 1900

I still haven't completed the portrait of the girl. Without her, all the other murals seem senseless to me. But I can't visualize her face... Why did I start painting these doors?

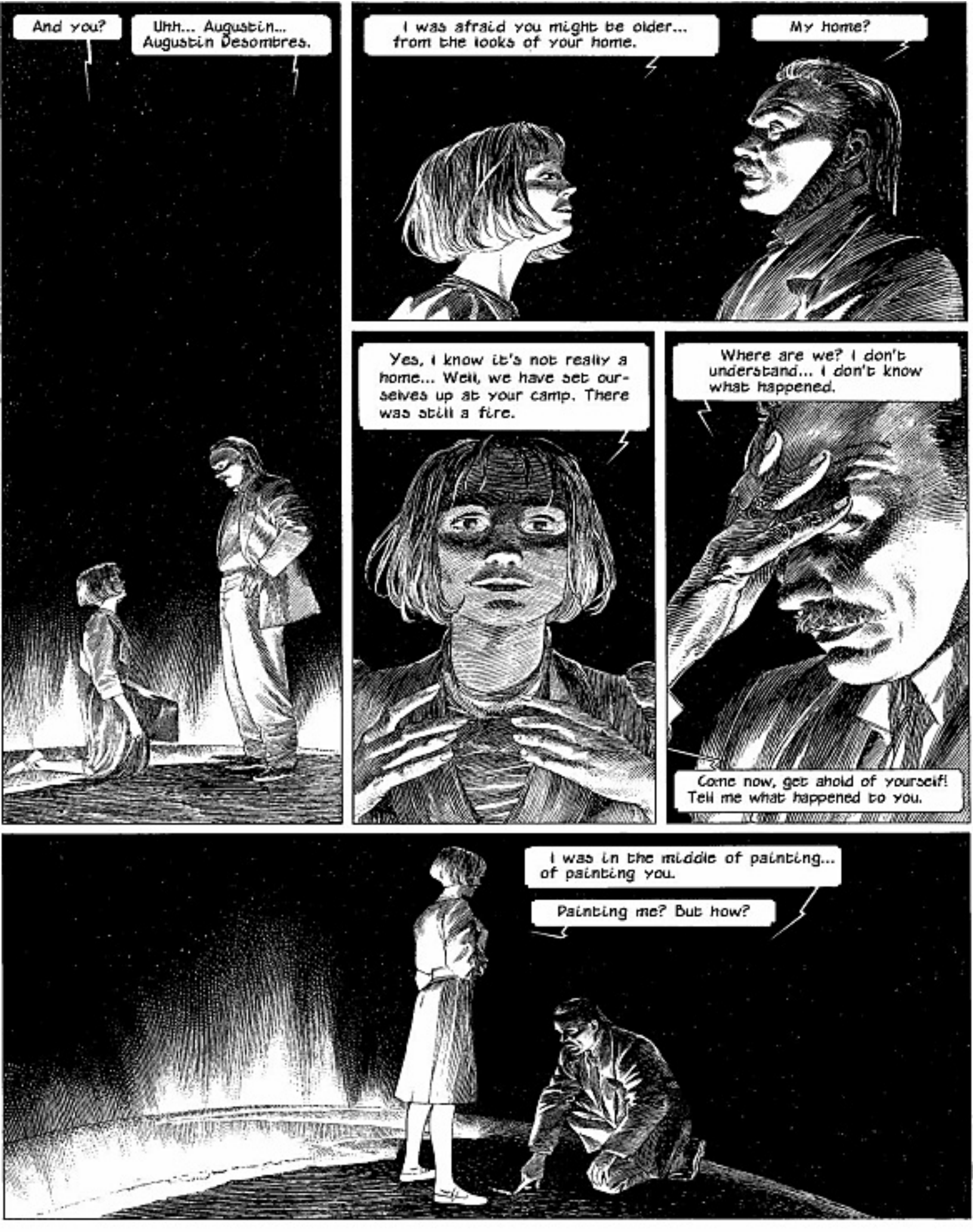
I have a strange feeling this house is changing around me. This hallway was not so narrow yesterday. Has the solitude of this place ended up making me crazy?

And still, I feel myself irresistibly drawn...


What...what's happening?
It's so dark!

Is someone there?

Mmh...
Hi! You've finally come!
It's you! But who are you?
Mary! My name is Mary!


And you?
Uhh... Augustin... Augustin Desombres.
I was afraid you might be older... from the looks of your home.
My home?
Yes, I know it's not really a home... Well, we have set ourselves up at your camp. There was still a fire.
Where are we? I don't understand... I don't know what happened.
Come now, get ahold of yourself! Tell me what happened to you.
I was in the middle of painting... of painting you.
Painting me? But how?

Yes I know that it's crazy, but I recognize you. I'm sure that it has been you all along.
And yet, I was coming up with nothing. For the first time in years, I really needed a living model!
I can pose for you, if you like... I saw it done in Sodrovni when I was younger.
Sodrovni?...But where are we? Mary, please tell me where we are.
On one of the spheres!
A sphere, that's impossible! Everything is so flat and deserted like Aubrac.
Yes, Augustin, it really is a sphere, separated from the others, the only one where I'm not leaning... It must be my home... perhaps, our home.

The spheres... that's incredible.
You're no longer drawing, Augustin?
I will, Mary, I was studying your hair. You didn't need to take your clothes off.
This one rebellious lock.
Augustin?
Yes, Mary...

This must be a dream.
You can't be real!

Unknown Place
Unknown Date
Please be careful, Mr. Wappendorf! You'll fall!

Uhhh...who... who are you?
Verne. Jules Verne, novelist. You don't know me, but I know you. Michel Ardan had me read your "Encyclopedia of Transportation."
Michel Ardan, but...
You've only just missed him. He set out again a few hours ago with his companion.
According to what they said, they got lost at the bottom of a chasm during an archeological expedition. They stayed here for awhile, before returning to their work.
Mary was right then. We really have fallen into the depths of our own world.
The place is extraordinary. Come, I'll show you all of it... Here, take this lamp!
But you, sir, what world do you come from? In what vessel did you arrive here?

I used no engine. And yet, God knows I have described such machines... But the most efficient and the most trustworthy, for me, is writing.
Writing? Explain.
Yes, Mr. Wappendorf, by sole force of imagination in certain privileged moments, I manage to completely abandon my own world and get transported...
It happened the first time some years ago...after visiting an exhibition...There was a strange painting there that held my attention for a long time, a painting by an artist called Augustin Desombres.
That evening, I started writing a story about that image and I fell asleep over my page... I found myself in the world of the painting...
Oh my, I'm leaning more and more!
Since then, I've had several extraordinary voyages on your planet. I've buried myself in the depths of your chasms, navigated the Sea of Silences, traversed the desert of the Somonites... Ah, Mr. Wappendorf, what a world yours is!

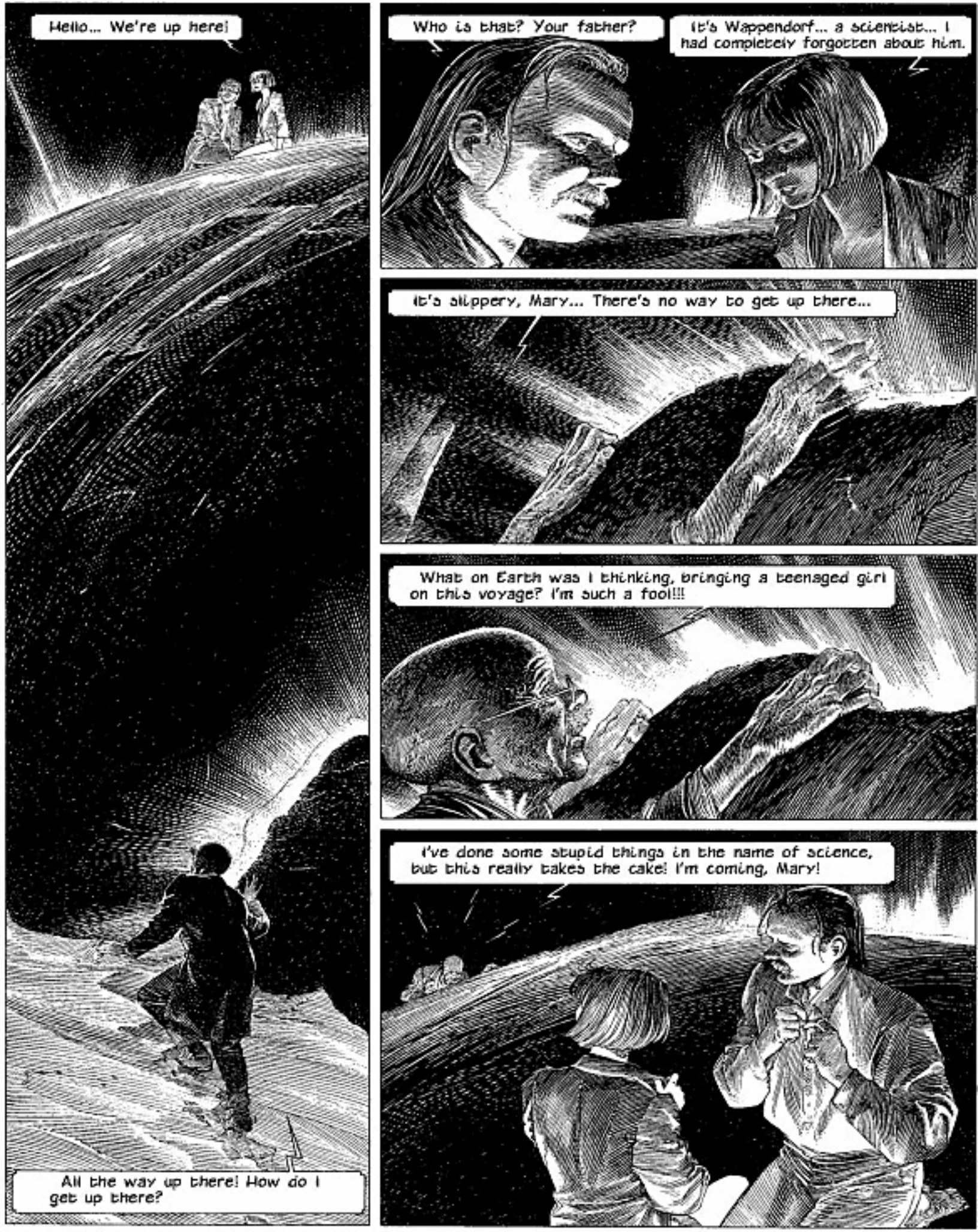
You're going to see, you won't regret having come down.
But I can't go on, I'm exhausted.
Don't worry! Ardan and his companion were leaning as much as you are.
Here, this is where I wanted to bring you.
So, what do you think?
Clearly, one of the spheres has detached itself from the others. The traces are still quite visible.
All these spheres are inter-connected. The absence of a single one could destabilize the whole system.

Yes, I'm starting to see it more clearly. There must have been some interference produced between the two worlds... and poor Mary's leaning condition is most certainly connected to it.
?
Who is Mary?
Ah, a most amazing young lady. But where has she gone off to? The general was right, I should never have brought her.
Mr. Verne, please excuse me, but I must go. It's imperative that I find her right away!
You're right, of course! This is no place for a young lady to be alone. Goodbye for now. Perhaps we'll meet again.
One last thing... all that I've said to you must remain our secret. Our two worlds are not yet ready to discover that they are governed by the same powers.

Unknown Place
Time... time is irrelevant!
I've never felt so alive.

It's funny, I thought I was attracted by another world...
I feel as if nothing exists any longer. Perhaps we're all that's left. It's not hard to imagine... just you and me.
You're so quiet, Augustin... What are you thinking about?

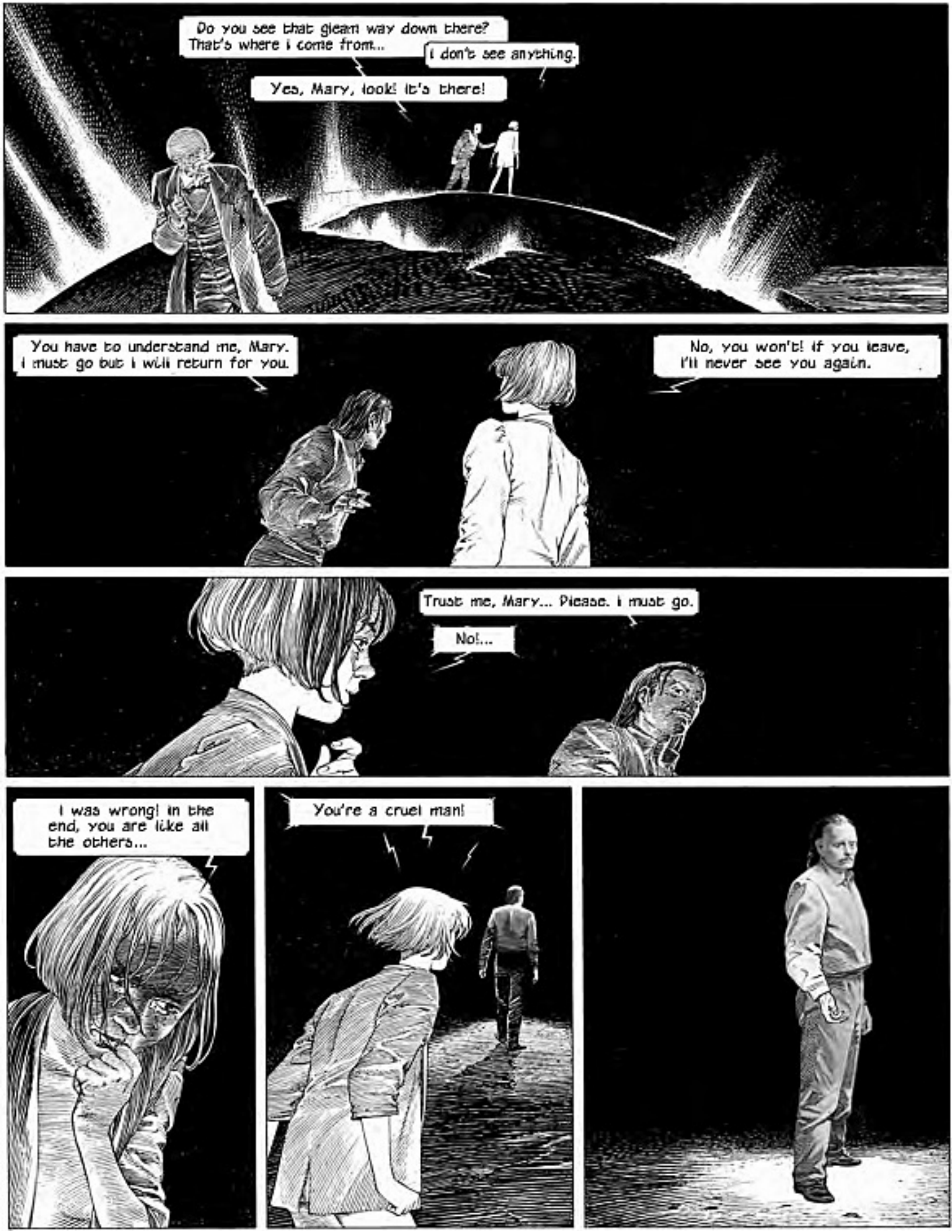
About you, Mary... About your portrait that I couldn't finish... But now I know I can!
I could draw all of your features from memory.
What good are images? You have me.
Forgive me!
It's okay, I understand!
?
MARY! MARY!

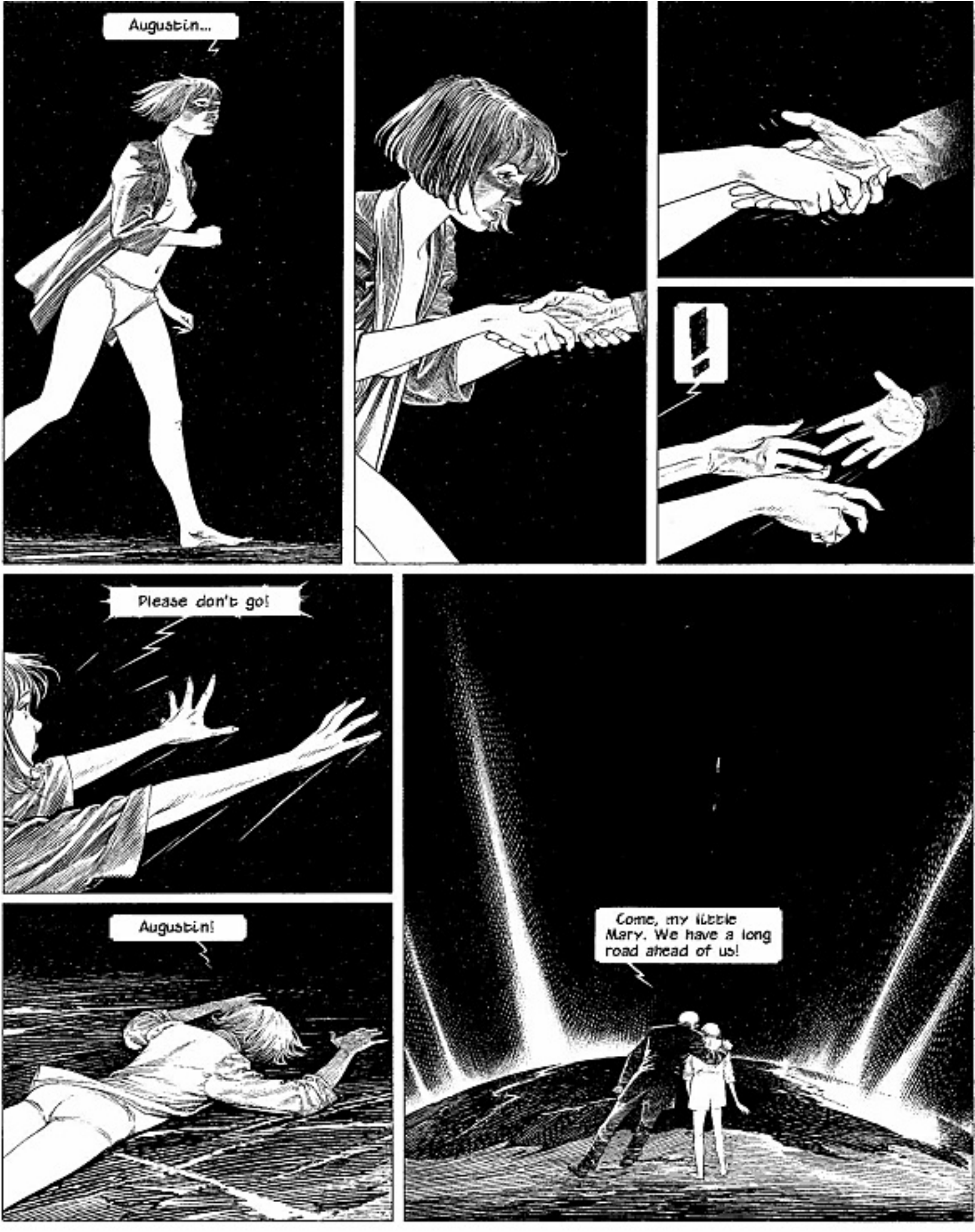

Hello... We're up here!
All the way up there! How do I get up there?
Who is that? Your father?
It's Wappendorf... a scientist... I had completely forgotten about him.
It's slippery, Mary... There's no way to get up there...
What on Earth was I thinking, bringing a teenaged girl on this voyage? I'm such a fool!!!
I've done some stupid things in the name of science, but this really takes the cake! I'm coming, Mary!

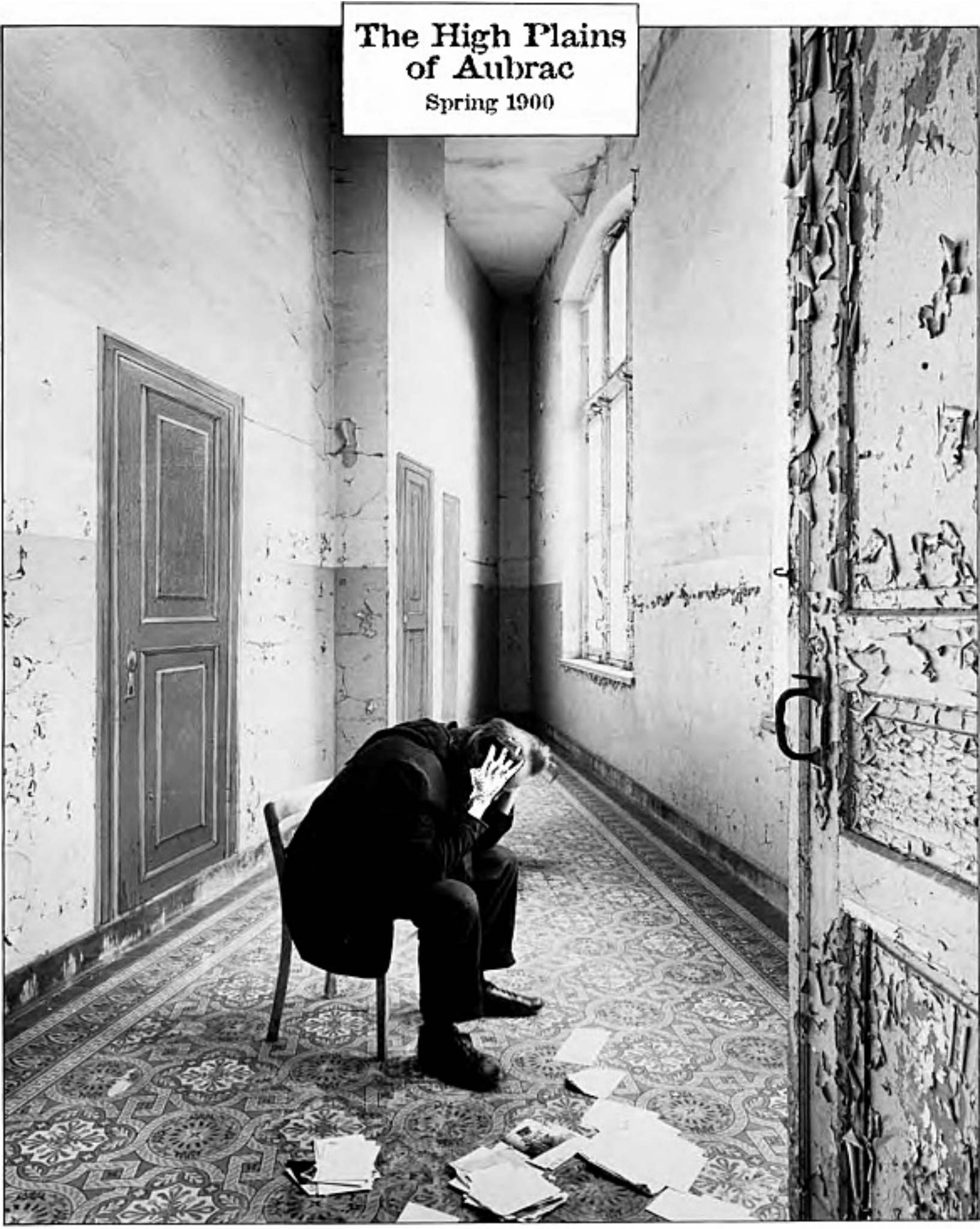
So... Mary... what's going on here? You disappeared from the campsite without any warning.
But, I told you that I was leaving, Professor!
No buts about it! And you, sir, whom I've not had the honor to meet...
My name is Desombres... Augustin Desombres.
Ah, the painter! I've heard of you. But Mary, you need to bid farewell to this gentleman. We must hurry back.
Come now, that's ridiculous... You hardly know one another.
Stop treating me like a child! I want to stay with Augustin! I love him!
No one can live here. Everything has to go back into order, everything has to take its normal course.
I don't want to go back. I want to stay here with Augustin... It's the first time I actually feel good about myself.
Normal? My mother is normal, my brother is normal. I have no desire to be like them!

When I started leaning, I didn't understand right away how lucky I was. I felt unhappy, excluded... But now, I've discovered all that it brought to me.
Listen, Mary, the fact that you lean everywhere except here is an enigma that science will surely resolve one day...
An enigma? One day? I want my life back, now! All you see are enigmas. But they mean nothing!
What do you mean, nothing? The celestial shell... that was nothing? The vessel of the desert... nothing?
Machines, Professor... that's all you know! But life, you don't know what it's about!
Life is about love. Have you ever loved anyone?
Oh, how you've changed, Mary. I feel I don't even know you anymore.
Come, Mr. Desombres, we have to talk seriously...
Don't go, Augustin, don't listen to him!

Mary is upset, unable to understand my explanations. But the situation is serious, Mr. Desombres, you must believe me...
A few hours ago, I met a native of your world, a Mr. Verne...
Verne?... Jules Verne?
Yes, that's his name. He spoke to me about one of your paintings. By some phenomenon that escapes us, it is likely that your paintings are the cause of all that's happened.
I don't understand. Where are you from?
From far away... for us, we had to rely on a rocketship to bring us here. For you, it was your mind, your art, your imagination that brought you here.
You are a visionary, Mr. Desombres, with very frightening powers. Our lives are affected by what you've painted... You could provoke cataclysms.
It's frightening. But I assure you that...
I know you don't know about your power. But any contact between our two worlds must cease. You must go home!
One thing that is clear to me. It's your painting which started this and your painting alone that can resolve this problem.
I understand, I believe I know what must be done.
What did he say to you?


Do you see that gleam way down there? That's where I come from...
I don't see anything.
Yes, Mary, look! It's there!
You have to understand me, Mary. I must go but I will return for you.
No, you won't! If you leave, I'll never see you again.
Trust me, Mary... Please. I must go.
No!...
I was wrong! In the end, you are like all the others...
You're a cruel man!


Augustin...
Please don't go!
Augustin!
Come, my little Mary. We have a long road ahead of us!


The High Plains
of Aubrac
Spring 1900

I found myself in the hallway again, my legs weak, my heart beating at breakneck speed. If my hand weren't so strangely scored, I'd swear that I'd dreamed it all.

I'm in no pain, but these lines frighten me. It's like a stigmata, the visible sign of my treachery. I will rub my hand as long as it takes to make them disappear.

It's no use... I carry this indelible trace of that moment when Mary took my hand to hold it in hers, as if this meeting has branded me forever with a red-hot iron.

But truthfully, my dear Mary, I am happy to not be unscathed... to keep this mark of you, this memory permanently etched into my skin. I realize now how stupid I was to come back. I miss you so.

Painting bores me... I'm nothing more than an automaton, working to change my frescoes. The brushes turn by themselves over the walls. Why did I listen to that Wappendorf? Why did I not stay by your side?

Your sphere has once again taken its place among the others.
The fissures and crevasses have closed up.
Everything has returned to its proper order.

I no longer hear anything, I no longer feel anything. Soon, I'm going to leave this place. I'm going to shut the doors to this house forever. I'm going to walk away and never look back.

I hate myself, Mary. You can't know how much I hate myself for leaving you. I hope you will forgive me.

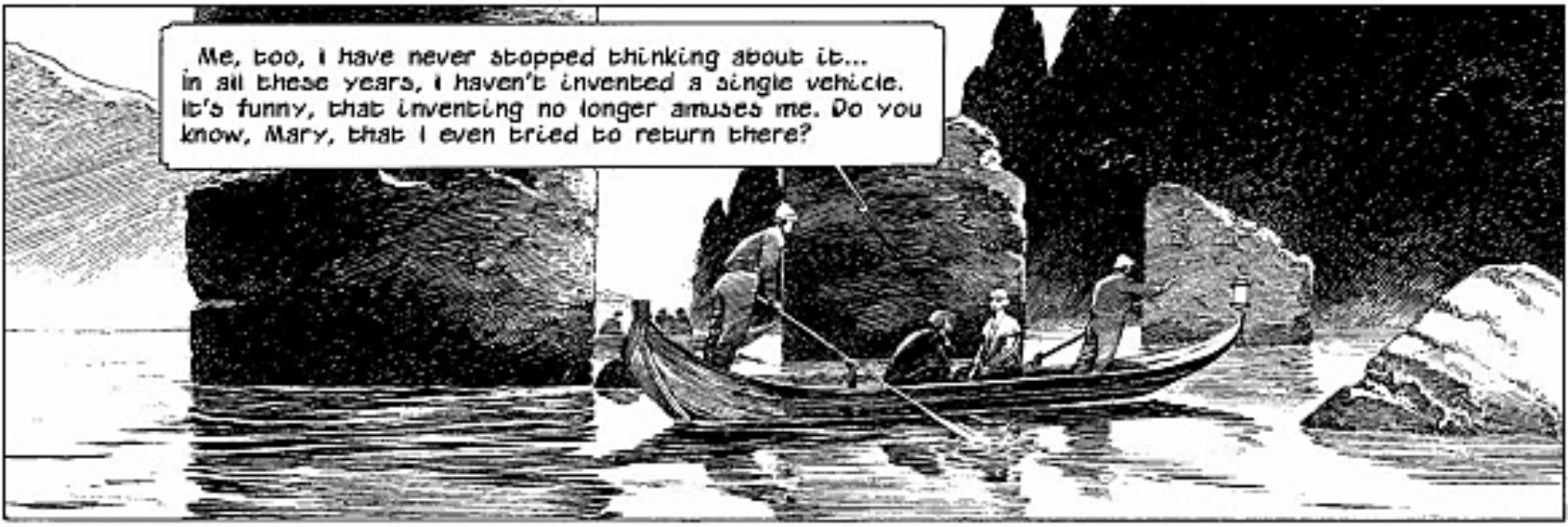
LAC VERT
(The Green Lake)
May 24th, 760
8:50pm
This festival comes at the right time! Mylos has truly gotten all its grandeur back.
If I'm not mistaken, you're Axel Wappendorf...
It's extraordinary, she's succeeded in gathering everyone that matters on the continent.
She's a remarkable woman!
What energy!
And what class...

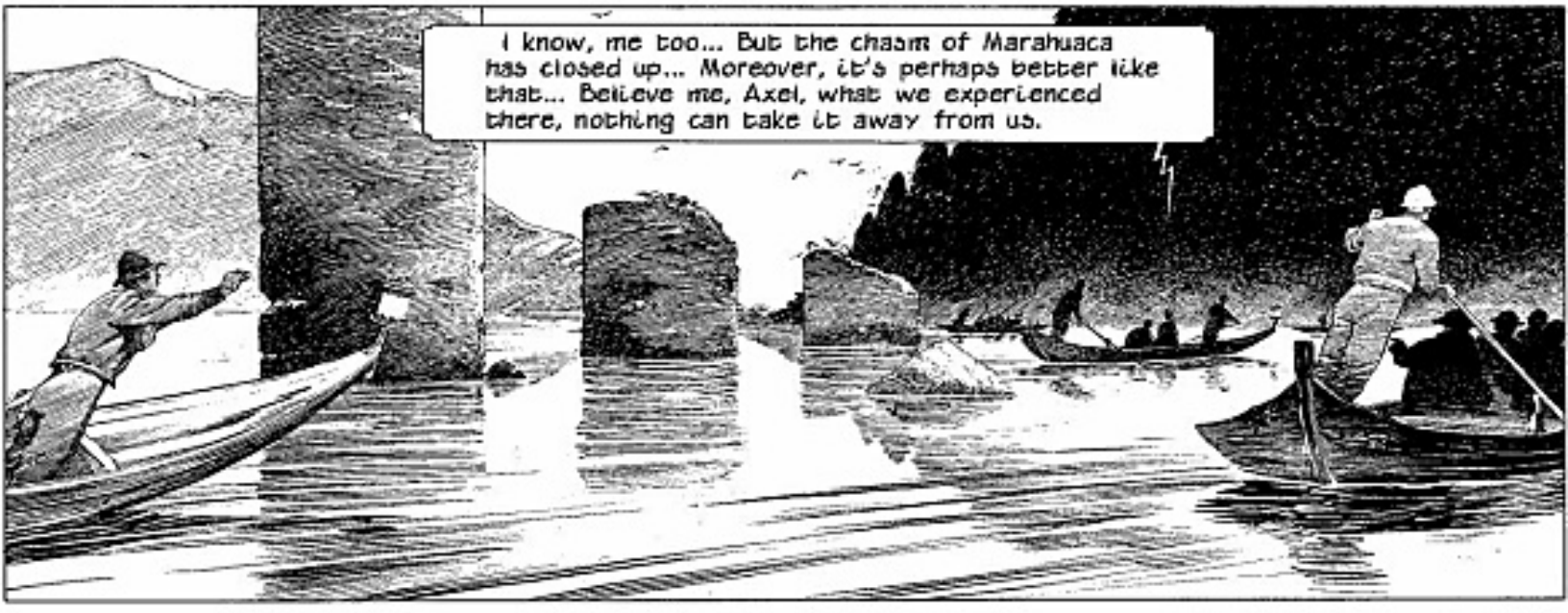
What is so impressive is that she succeeded in liberalizing without falling into anarchy.
Good evening, Mary... uhh, excuse me, Ms. von Rathen.
It's Mary to you, of course. You haven't changed, Axel. The years have been good to you.
You say that, Mary, but...
Come, Axel, let's find a more quiet place to talk!

When I think that it's been over six years since last I saw you...
Are you still angry with me, Mary?
No, I'm not. You were probably right, in your own way...
I followed your advice, Axel. I changed, and behaved like a responsible adult. I took up my father's place heading Mylos. My poor Papa, I'd have never thought he loved me so much! I have attempted to soften the order of things.
People say you've done wonders.
Oh, I'm far from succeeding in many respects, but I think I've brought some improvements.

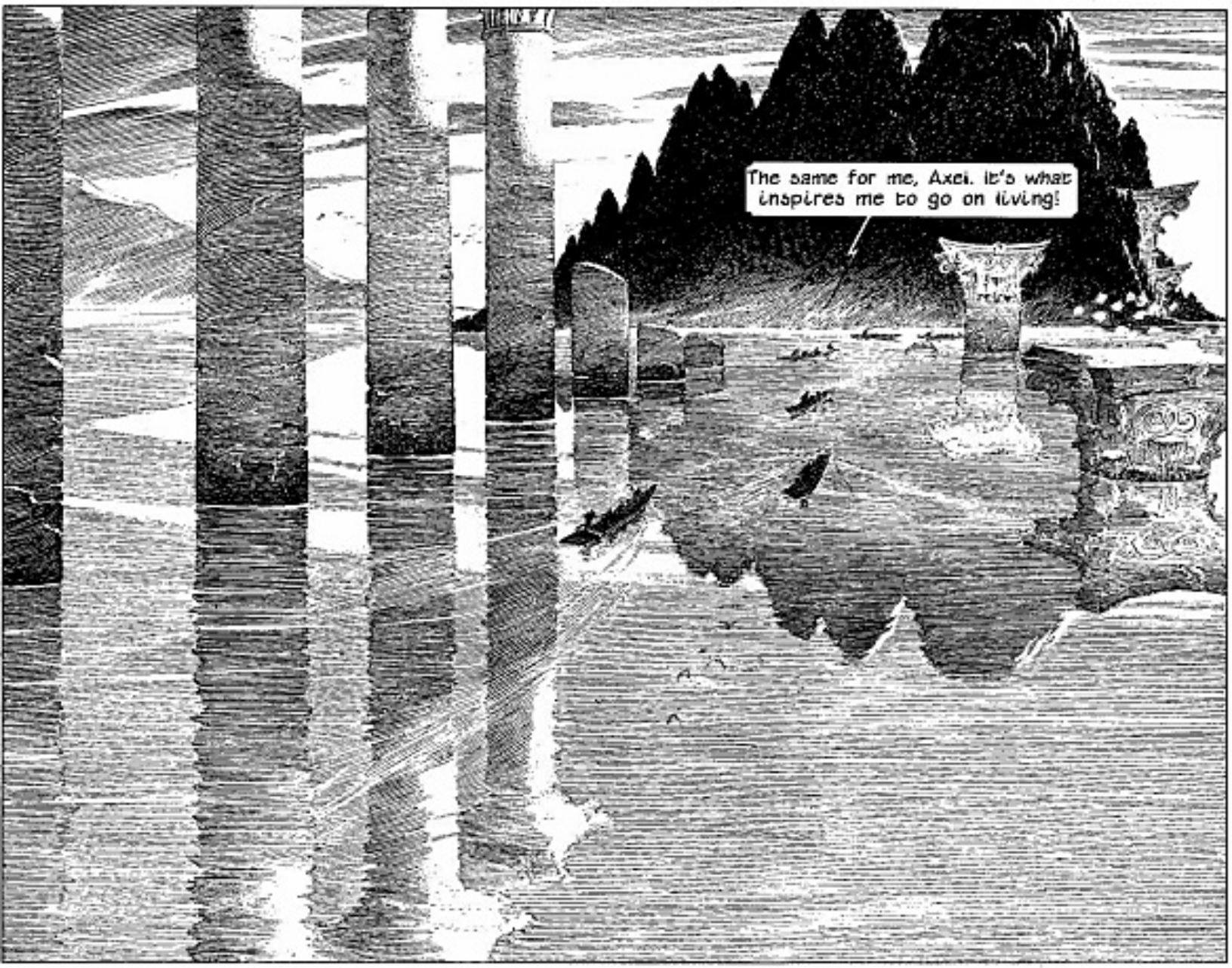
Yes, Axel, I've done what you called my duty. And yet, every day, I think about my Augustin and the time when I used to lean.

You know, perhaps, that my story has become little more than a tale to lull children to sleep. But for me, it's still as real, as present...


Me, too, I have never stopped thinking about it... In all these years, I haven't invented a single vehicle. It's funny, that inventing no longer amuses me. Do you know, Mary, that I even tried to return there?


I know, me too... But the chasm of Marahuaca has closed up... Moreover, it's perhaps better like that... Believe me, Axel, what we experienced there, nothing can take it away from us.

Yes, Mary, it might be the best experience I ever had, besides meeting you.


The same for me, Axel. It's what inspires me to go on living!

The End

IMAGINING *THE LEANING GIRL*

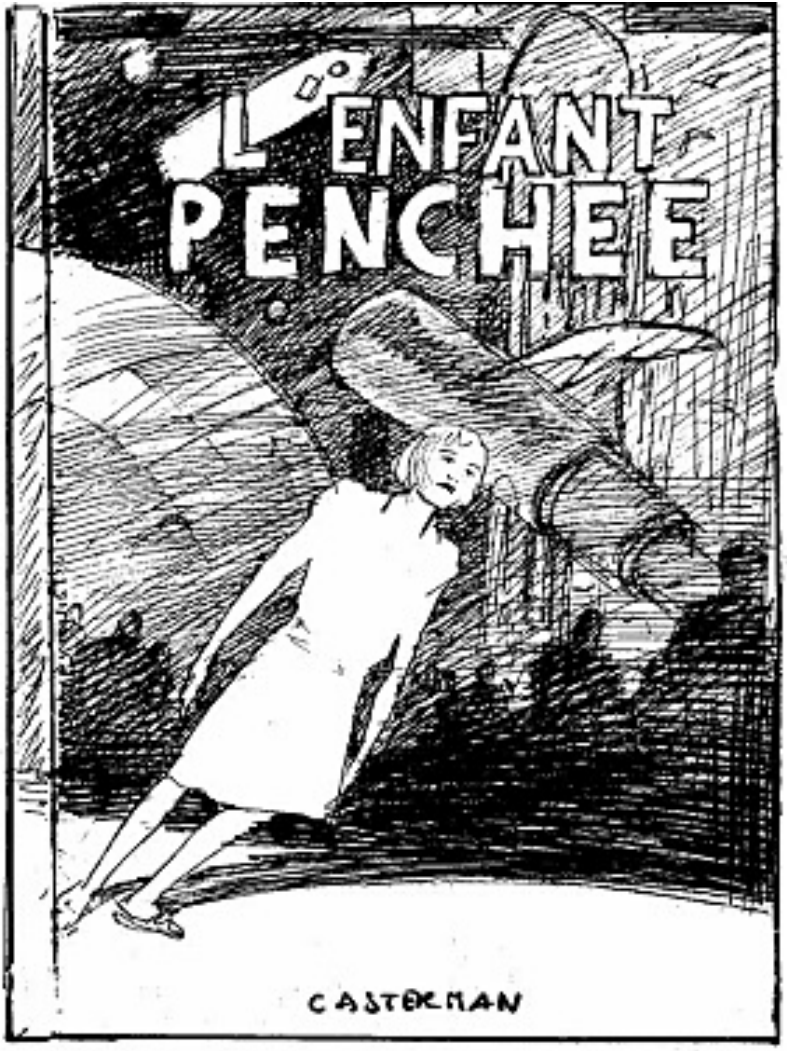
sketches & preliminaries

character studies: Mary von Rathen

character studies

Alaxis study

The Star Express study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page layouts